APEX MAGAZINE

ISSUE 59

APRIL 2014

EDITED BY SIGRID ELLIS

COVER ART BY MEHRDAD ISVANDI

APEX-MAGAZINE.COM

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Table of Contents

Editorial

Resolute: Notes from the Editor–in–Chief
Sigrid Ellis

Fiction

Perfect
Haddayr Copley–Woods

Juniper, Gentian, and Rosemary
Pamela Dean

Steel Snowflakes in My Skull
Tom Piccirilli

The Cultist's Son
Ferrett Steinmetz

Repairing the World
John Chu

Nonfiction

Interview with Mehrdad Isvandi
Loraine Sammy

Interview with Ferrett Steinmetz
Maggie Slater

After Our Bodies Fail
Abra Staffin–Wiebe

Poetry

Cogs
Beth Cato

Unlabelled Core c. Zanclean (5.33 Ma)
Michele Bannister

Tell Me the World is a Forest
Chris Lynch

Aristeia
Sonya Taaffe

Excerpt

The Violent Century
Lavie Tidhar

Resolute: Notes from the Editor–in–Chief

The world works in downright strange ways.

Magazines are put together months in advance. It was in, oh, December of last year, I think, that Cameron and Elise and I determined that the April issue of Apex would be about repair. About fixing the world, about how that goes right or goes wrong, about how pieces interconnect and fit together. Or don't. About how the past can be repaired, or replaced, about the friability of a body, a plan, a history, or a life.

For a week in February of 2014, I was told I almost certainly had throat cancer.

And then a damn miracle occurred, and I do not.

I spent a great deal of February of this year thinking about the plan I hoped for my life, and how that was about to change. How my body was failing and faltering, and whether or not it could be repaired. As I write this essay, I find myself still emotionally returning from the land of "I have cancer" back to the mundane trials and triumphs of my everyday world. It's a weird rebuilding. With all the setbacks and frustrations I experience, I find myself thinking that at least I am not spending this month undergoing radiation therapy. I am arguing with my kids about their chores instead of coughing up my insides.

I don't have to rebuild my world. I am desperately grateful for that.

The characters and beings inhabiting *Apex Magazine* this month are… variably fortunate, on that front. The protagonist of Ferrett Steinmetz's "The Cultist's Son" has found himself inexplicably alive, yet uncertain what that life is worth. In "Perfect," by Haddayr Copley–Woods, we are given a slightly disturbing take on what a rebuilt world should be. John Chu's "Repairing the World" blends literal world–repair with the building and re–building of individual life.

"Steel Snowflakes," by Tom Piccirilli, focuses on body repair gone strange and difficult. So does the poem "Cogs," by Beth Cato. "Aristeia," by Sonya Taaffe, and "Tell Me the World is a Forest," by Chris Lynch, both give intimate portraits of world–shaping. Michele Bannister speaks of pressures and changes in a geologic framework, in "Unlabelled Core, c. Zanclean (5.33 M.A.)". Abra Staffin–Wiebe's essay, "After Our Bodies Fail," looks at the history and future of human physical medicine. And our

cover art, “Time to Be Zebra,” by Mehrdad Isvandi, depicts yet another form of physical reshaping in masks and deception.

For our subscribers we have a reprint of Pamela Dean’s “Juniper, Gentian, and Rosemary.” We also are pleased to give you an excerpt from *The Violent Century*, by Lavie Tidhar.

We have two interviews this month. Maggie Slater interviews Ferrett Steinmetz, and Loraine Sammy interviews cover artist Mehrdad Isvandi. Our podcast for April is John Chu’s “Repairing the World,” read by Windy Bowlsby and produced by Erika Ensign.

It’s an often–broken world we inhabit. Things falter, plans and bodies and hopes go awry. But we, and the world, keep going. Rebuilt, repaired, and reformed. The future will not look like the past. It’s out there, waiting for us, anyway.

Sigrid Ellis
Editor–in–Chief

Perfect

Haddayr Copley–Woods

Quinn hated everything.

In infancy she hated first diapers, then dolls. Later she hated the school bus, her eagerly smiling teachers, insipid songs about scissor safety, and standing in line for soggy meat and cheese sandwiches she didn't even want to eat.

As an adolescent, she loathed other teens who pretended to hate everything but actually liked: shocking their parents with body piercings, drinking sickly sweet things that made them feel brave but act like cowards, and groping frantically in the back of cars.

She hated her parents and the tiny sighs of relief they expelled as they waved, arms around each other, watching the train pull away from the station after she got a scholarship to a faraway Eastern college.

They had no other children, of course. While Quinn genuinely despised the earnest way her father chewed his toast in the mornings and her mother's brisk, cheery: "hellooooo" to every single friend, neighbor, or acquaintance she came across (and there were so many), she was self aware enough to realize that no one who birthed a child like her would be eager to have another go at it.

Certainly Quinn realized she was horrible, and she detested herself. But it was with the same dispassionate hatred she regarded grammatically incorrect advertisements, cooing young couples, long hikes in itchy back country to see a view that was going to make her sneer anyway, and smug bicyclists: calves tense, wrists bent, as they careened wildly through traffic.

You would think that Quinn's deeply unpleasant aspect would keep would–be friends and lovers away, but instead it drew them. Anarchists, feminists, and nihilists claimed her for their own as she also hated government, patriarchy, and hope. Her disdain for all food had left her with the long, lean physique of a model, and lovers and friends mistook her air of biting dislike alternating with weary resignation as intensity, romanticism, and a deep need for help and human compassion. This made her irresistible to nearly everyone.

She abhorred men and women equally, and she took them to bed without discrimination. She was repulsed by the women's breathy mewing sounds of arousal and the ridiculous stoic silence of the men. Her own orgasms — sharp, shallow, and undignified — disgusted her.

Eventually, she turned away from all companionship and toward her studies, taking a career in science.

Here, she thrived. Her equal and unyielding dislike for politics (interpersonal and geopolitical), rats, monkeys, humans, microscopes, telescopes, gloves, and theories made her one of a handful of truly objective scholars, and her reputation and status grew.

She hated all of it, of course: the long hours, the accolades, the travel. The hostility and condescension of the men and the attempts at solidarity from the women. The harsh fluorescents of the lab, and later — as she moved to physics — the smell of dry–erase markers.

§

Then, she found it: the perfect equation.

Undiscovered, beautiful, balanced; decidedly useful.

It would do exactly what she wanted: it would end everything. With no unpleasant wrangling with mechanical engineers or nuclear scientists.

It could all end. No more mewling shitting babies in waiting rooms. Socks that slid down her heels. Enthusiastic approval of supposedly spectacular shoes. Chatty strangers on elevators. Using the word 'utilize' to sound impressive. Youth symphonies.

She discovered with her newfound knowledge that she could now see the warp and weft of the universe: the shining strands that bound everything together. The patterns. The bright place where it was all tied together in a hopelessly simple knot.

Another person might have called it beautiful.

But she was not another person. With firm, even strokes, Quinn erased the equation from the board so no one else would see it. She walked down the back stairs and waited at the campus shuttle stop as the structure of the world soared with transcendent harmony before her eyes.

On the shuttle, she could see the way in which the steel bolts and the handgrips connected with the air around them, gently pushing against gravity. The unspoken communication between the synapses of a young woman looking out of the window and those of the youth next to her.

Superimposed over all of it: the couple, the window, the glimmering air, was the equation. It thundered through her mind like the memory of a lover. She gasped at the beauty of it, and with the knowledge that if she used it — the equation, too, would end.

But to refrain from implementing an equation of such beauty and usefulness is a horrible crime, she thought, as she stepped off the shuttle that always would stop just a little too far down the track to allow an easy exit.

Entering the apartment building she had chosen solely for its proximity to the train, Quinn unlocked the door, hearing the sighing harmony of key in lock, of wood and metal — and stepped into her kitchen.

She looked around her home. She should have felt something for it. But she felt no qualms about ending the extra–small appliances, the old peeling vinyl flooring, the unused dishes stacked behind clean glass panes. Even the magnetic radiation that streamed from the microwave: swirling in the thick strands of time, of space, of air and light; were not interesting enough to cause her regret.

But. The equation.

Quinn’s eyes filled with tears; she shook with raw, unwelcome feeling.

She loved the equation.

She placed her bag on the table and took a deep breath. She would not allow this new emotion to sway her.

Quinn readied her hands. Stood in her kitchen on the precipice, paused for a horrible moment; lingering over the shapes and weight of the symbols in her mind. She looked into the dazzling, simple knot holding everything together.

Carefully, quickly, before she lost her nerve, Quinn reached out and untied the world.

Haddayr Copley–Woods has published dark fantasy and personal essays in places like *Strange Horizons, Minnesota Public Radio, Ideomancer*, and *Year's Best American Erotica*. She's a freelance writer who lives with her sprawling and strange family in Minneapolis, MN. This is her first science fiction sale and she is ridiculously overjoyed about it. You can find her work at haddayr.com.

Cogs

Beth Cato

each morning she awoke as a cog
within a vast machine
around her relentless clicks
like a thousand flurried crickets

she closed her eyes and knew
the length of each stitch
exactly when to pivot the cloth
the perfect rhythm of foot on pedal

she measured each day by shirts
by how the white pile grew
the wooden seat cupped her hips
like a tree growing around a stone

it only made sense when they grafted needles
to her fingertips
when her shoes melded to the pedal
when her lips craved the taste of oil
instead of thinned coffee
when her unneeded eyes were plucked out
preserved in a tin beneath her bed
and her fingers and feet never lost rhythm

Beth Cato's debut steampunk novel *The Clockwork Dagger* will be released by HarperCollins Voyager in September 2014. She's originally from Hanford, California, but now resides in Arizona with her husband and son. Her short fiction, poetry, and tasty cookie recipes can be found at www.bethcato.com.

The Book of Apex: Volume 4 of Apex Magazine
edited by Lynne M. Thomas

The Book of Apex Volume 4 collects the original fiction from Hugo–winning editor Lynne M. Thomas's first fifteen issues at the helm of *Apex Magazine*, which included two Hugo Award nominations for the magazine.

Thirty–three science fiction, fantasy, and horror short stories grab readers by their emotional cores to stare deep into the source of our humanity and inhumanity. Well–known authors like Ken Liu, Genevieve Valentine, Catherynne M. Valente, Lavie Tidhar, and Alethea Kontis, along with newer voices, sketch surreal pasts, presents, and futures full of characters with familiar and outsized desires and fears.

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Apex Publications

Steel Snowflakes in My Skull

Tom Piccirilli

My death smells like cold steel and hot vomit. I touch my head and feel the cranial cap tightly holding in the fragments of my skull. I also have three metal snowflakes in there. My chest is covered with those little surgeon masks, all rocking with my retech. I'm still tossing up. The anaesthesiologist told me some people get violently sick. I laughed it off. I never get sick. Except when I'm dead.

The neurosurgeon showed me the snowflakes before I went under.

I've been dead three times now in my forty–eight years. As a kid I went through a windshield while my drunk father was hightailing it from a minor fender–bender, running from the cops. I was technically ghosted for three and a half minutes.

I met another end a few years later in my freshman semester when I got drunk at a party, sat in an open second–story window of a dorm, and slipped out and plunged onto a brick walkway.

And now the neurosurgeon just plucked a tumor out of my head the size of a golf ball. He explained how he was going to saw my skull apart and replace it with three titanium plates. The plates were tiny. They didn't look like any version of the word plate that I ever imagined. They were pretty and delicate and had teeny little screws in them to be screwed into bone. I can picture him with a screwdriver giving a last twist.

The plates are sending signals. I can't quite understand what they're saying, but they're screaming it. The vibrations hurt my ears and teeth. I hurl again. I have to grab a nurse as the gurney wheels by.

"Can you clean these masks off me?"

She does so without hesitation. I also want to ask if she can hear the plates shouting, but I'm afraid she'll say no, or even worse, yes.

They wheel me up and down the corridors. The guy pushing me might be a male nurse, a security guard, or a candy striper, I have no idea. He's trying to kill time, pushing me the long way around the floor, slowly. He says hello to other people walking in the halls. My metal plates repeat his hellos and his and howyadoins. They have their own voices. They don't sound alike and they don't sound like me.

My room is in ICU, so I’m not allowed to have flowers and balloons. It makes the titanium snowflakes distraught. They bitch and whine about how much nicer the room would look with more color.

I don’t know how to address the plates. I ask their names. They don’t have any, and ask plaintively for me to name them. I give it a go with Tom, Dick, and Harry. They badger me that for an imaginative person I certainly stink at name–giving. I try Fester, Gomez, and Lurch. They seem happier. They gleefully giggle like children.

They ring together striking mad chords in my brain. I grunt in agony and grab the skull cap in both my hands, pushing in on my temples to keep such awful noise locked away. I’m wheeled past a moaning old woman who rises slightly from her pillows and glares at me. She hisses like a cat and covers her own ears.

Gomez asks, “The hell’s her problem?”

“Nasty old woman,” Fester puts in.

They begin ringing together in Christmas carols.

The gurney keeps moving down the burning lit hall. I still can’t see who’s pushing me. We pass a ten year old girl with bandaged eyes in a wheelchair and she wishes us, “Merry Christmas!”

“You too!” Lurch calls.

It’s not Christmas, but who am I to ruin the mood?

A grizzled old jarhead with USMC tats all over his forearms is walking by alone, holding onto his IV pole for support. He turns his chin slightly in my direction. Gomez states quite clearly, “And thank, you, sir, for your service to our country!”

The marine taps his left ear and squints as if in pain.

My scalp scars are itchy as hell. I brush my right frontal lobe gently and here the plates chime. Fester gives a laugh. He’s ticklish, apparently.

The marine takes a stutter–step and nearly falls on his face. Instead, he catches himself in time to merely drop to one knee. He whispers, “Who’s laughing at me?” His eyes dart to me. I flap my hands innocently.

Next on the gurney journey is a twenty–nothing with no legs. He has the bruised haunted look of a veteran who’s given everything and received only a purple heart back. The guy pushing me slows a step. The kid nods. Fester rings a high C. I lift my hand and wave as we pass. I look down at my legs and wonder if I’ll ever walk again, and if I’ll ever be as grateful for walking as the kid might be. Gomez clangs.

“Where the hell are we?” I ask. “How much further?”

The guy pushing doesn’t respond. I wish we’d pass a mirror.

“Can you see who’s walking with us?” I ask the metal plates.

They all chime no.

I wonder if I’m dead already. It would answer a few questions. It might even take the fear away.

“Are you God?” I ask.

I sound insane, but that’s okay. The skull–cap plays into the look of madness. And who am I showing off for anyway? My skull fragments?

Lurch tings and says, “It’s not God.”

Who am I to argue?

One corridor merges into another and another and so on. The hall lights are blinding white. I try to count the seconds off but I keep losing my place. I ask Lurch to keep count but he has trouble with it too.

“Is it purgatory?” I ask. “Is this The Waiting Room?”

“I don’t want to wait around forever!” Fester gasps.

“Neither do I.”

“None of us do.”

A girl with a broken brain like mine approaches on crutches, her head swathed as mine is swathed beneath the skull cap. Her eyes are dim but focused on whoever’s pushing the gurney. She smiles and nods. I smile and nod back. She doesn’t see it. Fester, Gomez, and Lurch also smile and nod. She does note them.

“Your mother and father are right behind me, Tommy Pic.”

My mother was ten years dead and my father more than forty. Still I searched the corridor. I had a lot of regrets, a lot of things I still needed to say to each of them. I tried to lift my head from the gurney but the plates rang and vibrated through my teeth painfully.

“I think she’s lying,” said Gomez.

“Me too,” put in Fester.

“No,” Lurch intoned. “It’s the truth. See them? Here they are.”

I didn’t see them but I couldn’t see much. I tried to list my sins and wondered which of them was bad enough to keep me out of heaven, or was it a cumulative effect? The thought of it made my head and my heart ache. I wanted more time to make things right, but I didn’t know what things they might be. Still, I had to try.

I said, “Stop pushing me. I want to get off.”

I didn’t wait for the nurse or angel or demon to stop. I made an effort to swing my legs over the side and rolled aside and splatted on my face.

“That was stupid,” Fester said.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

I looked up at the guy pushing the gurney. It wasn’t my father, it wasn’t Jesus, he didn’t have wings. He had a name badge on that said his name was Darrel. He was black and weighed in the neighborhood of four hundred pounds. He looked at me without expression. He made no move to help me up. I reached for the gurney and got to my feet.

“Who are you, Darrel?”

“The guy who’s supposed to be bringing you to post–op recovery.”

“That can’t be all.”

“It is.”

“He’s lying too,” Gomez said.

“I know,” I told him.

“Then why’d you ask?” Darrel asked.

It snows in my head, a blizzard of noise and voices.

Darrel may not be death but he might as well be. He moves with the endless and immutable emotionless motion forward, just like death. My head rebels at the thought, but also accepts the potential truth of the moment.

“This isn’t ICU,” I say.

“No, it’s not.”

“So where are we?”

Gomez says, “I’m hungry.”

“Steel snowflakes don’t get hungry,” I tell him, although I really wouldn’t know.

“Me too,” Fester agrees.

“And me,” Lurch intones with a deep brooding resonance.

One more thing about Darrel: he was made of shadow. The shadow is almost as loud as the snowfall.

I hold onto the wall and start stumbling down the hall. I don’t know where I’m going, and I’m not sure that I can get there from here, but I like being on my feet again, alive, moving, welcoming all the others as they approach. Family, friends, smiling faces, bandaged children. They step to me casually, but eventually I begin to laugh and run.

Tom Piccirilli is the author of more than twenty–five novels including *A Choir of Ill Children*, *The Cold Spot*, and *The Last Kind Words*. He's a four–time winner of the Bram Stoker Award, a two–time winner of the International Thriller Writers Award, and has twice been nominated for the mystery genres top award, the Edgar.

The Cultist's Son

Ferrett Steinmetz

"I used to think the sky would peel open," the girl with the green hair confesses, curling black–nailed fingers around a can of Pabst. "I always had bloody knees, because I never looked down when I walked — I'd clasp my eyes to the sky, bracing myself for the sight of a gigantic hand pulling aside the clouds. If I saw Him coming, maybe I could pray hard enough in time for God to forgive me. Otherwise… Mom told me I'd burn like the whore I was. In *sixth grade*."

Her smile is shy, a crooked little secret that Derleth likes. He finds his own head bobbing in agreement, his body resonating to the tune of her broken childhood.

The girl's smile melts into a relieved grin; she's discovered a fellow member of a secret society in a cold and hostile land. She grasps his hand.

"You know, don't you?" she whispers. He can barely hear her over the death metal band onstage, pounding out a Cannibal Corpse cover tune. "You know what it's like to live in fear of the world ending?"

Derleth closes his eyes. He can see the clouds parting across the mesa, black lightning slithering to the ground. Except it's not lightning — it's tentacles tumbling from the sky, suckered and glistening and rooted to something big enough to have engulfed the Earth. They flop down from cumulus clouds, slapping against the ground hard enough to cause tremors. The rusting tin shed caves in, collapsing upon his six brothers before the corrugated walls are scooped away by a questing tendril. A hundred other boneless limbs descend hungrily upon his squalling brothers. They haul them, wailing, up into the sky, up with a billion other innocents plucked from collapsing skyscrapers, mud huts, once–sleepy suburbs. Clouds, now tinged with crushed red.

All the while, Mother dances in crazed triumph, naked, breasts flopping. Spattered in blood, she gargles the syllables that beckoned the Goddess here…

Derleth shakes off the — dream? Idea? It's hard to say. The girl with the green hair chews her pierced lip. She's so afraid he'll laugh at her, so relieved she *thinks* she's found someone who shares her terror of the Rapture, that already she's confusing intensity for love.

Derleth thinks of himself as an empty cabinet. He knows if he remains quietly agreeable, people will stack up his insides with their own needs and desires, imbuing him with all sorts of cheerful motivations. And since he does not trust his own voice — Mother's doing — he finds that preferable to telling people who he is. Was.

Except now, he's found someone who knows a part of him.

"You were raised by fundamentalists, too," she begs, trying to make a light game of it. "Weren't you?"

He turns away from her to dive into the mosh pit, terrified of the unknowable, always terrified of the unknowable.

§

The next night, Derleth is once again drenched in other people's sweat. His fellow moshers grind their exertion into his skin with grimy elbows, flailing kicks to the face, spotlight–heated bodies flopping down on him from above, until Derleth's bruised chest is sheened glistening. The music roars, distorted into an eardrum–hammering incoherence, but everyone in the pit hears the intent: a call to thrash.

Derleth loves the mosh pit's embrace. Hugs make him nervous. Violence is the only intimacy Mother ever spoke, so here is where Derleth fills up on human contact; in the ritualized destruction of the pit, before finding an alleyway to sleep in.

He looks up; the girl is shoved up against the stage on the far side of the pit, watching him, braced to hurl her slim frame into the welter of hulking metalheads. She's shaved her green hair into a stubbled crosshatch pattern in an attempt to look hardcore, but her heart–shaped face is too cute to look mean.

His skin goosepimples. She's encroaching on his space. Her eyes are defiant.

He waits for the music to break — that moment when the band halves the tempo, downshifting straight into violence. Then he slingshots himself at her, a barrel–chested bullet, ready to knock her out of his world.

She launches herself right back at him, grinning, as if this is all a *game*.

Derleth hates grins. Mother's grins were all monkey–hatred grins, a challenge expressed in teeth —

— Mother grinning down at him as he writhes in a bug–filled blanket, the sunlight like needles poking his eyes, his neck so stiff he cannot turn to look away from the Arizona sun. He feels death crawling up his spine, a hot–white pain that spews from his mouth. It is not yet his ninth birthday.

Mother, pregnant as always — he could not remember a time when her nipples weren't smeared with stale milk — has stood over him for hours, now, drinking in his every twitch and shiver.

"I'm dying," he croaks. His throat is sandpaper, his lips caked with dried vomit. His brothers sometimes bring him water from the plastic rain–catchers, sometimes wander away; they're too little, all sunburnt babyflesh toddling awkward, they can't understand. Mother does, though. "Please."

She kneels down, eyes gleaming with triumph. She thumps his chest, three times, as though sharing a fine joke.

"We're soft," she croons. "Our flesh decays, makes no mark on the hard rock of this world. Nothing will remember us, unless we hurt it." She swallows thickly, her bug eyes rolling in contemplation. "What can you hurt?"

"I hurt," he moans.

"Then only you will remember you." She gets up to wander away, disappointed, distracted. "And why bother, when you will be gone?"

Shivering, Derleth watches in horror as Mother walks out of his field of vision, chanting her nonsense language —

— and the green–haired girl slams into his chest, sending him reeling into a pair of Juggalos.

It's a good pain. The shock jangling through his nerves reminds him he's alive, his heart is pumping, that he left Mother behind in Arizona. The green–haired girl stumbles back for more, elbowing her way through the pit's muscled mayhem, ducking under a crowd–surfer to headbutt him in the stomach.

She sees the ghosts in his eyes; every blow she delivers is an exorcism. The pit reduces them to survival mode, robs them of contemplation; a pause for memory means a boot to the face. This sea of flailing punches is where they destroy their past, and she gleefully transforms wretched memories into throbbing bruises.

This is love.

And they are in the darkened parking lot, kissing and biting and clawing, licking sweat from skin in a filthy rutting beauty. She tugs him into a rusting Saturn, shoves crumpled McDonald's bags off the back seat, never taking her mouth off his. She fumbles at his belt, then tugs her camouflage pants down around tattooed ankles. The scent of her excitement fills the car. And as he looks down —

— Mother sits spread–legged for hours at a time, one hand clenching the back of Derleth's neck to press his cheek against her thigh so he must watch. Her other hand endlessly strokes the flaps of pink flesh between her legs, contorting it, displaying it.

She is always like this when she gives birth.

"The Goddess's cunt is black as ebon," his mother whispers. "She is always fecund. This is always yawning wide, spawning wide. Things squirm out. She leaves them behind. She will fill the world with life until She creates something strong enough to end it."

His mother's cunt convulses, spattering Derleth's cheeks with mucus. The pale, spider–haired skull of yet another brother spasms into view —

Derleth falls back against the car door, wailing, nose wet with terror and snot.

She stops, baffled… then slips her arms around him. Derleth freezes, unable to stop crying; he does not know how to be touched. She curls around him, stroking his hair.

"We're not sinners," she reassures him, urgent enough to convince two people. "There's no God watching. It's just us."

He wishes there was a God watching, something conscious fine–tuning the mechanisms of the universe. But here, in the car with this beautiful girl, all he feels is the touch of the Goddess — this stiff–dicked need to fill the world with flesh.

He struggles. She clings tighter, whispering comfort, until he slumps into sleep.

§

He wakes up on a futon, in a small apartment cluttered with old Chinese takeout boxes and Ramen noodle wrappers. A note lies on the pillow.

At work. Eat whatever you need. Rest. You look like you need some recovery time — Gabrielle

P.S. — Please don't steal anything.

There isn't much to steal: a small TV, an iPod charger, a coffeemaker. But he feels safe here. It's the first place since he was fifteen that he hasn't had to worry about roaming cops, predatory homeless, the weather.

He flicks on the TV. To Derleth, eight hours of uninterrupted television is like a trip to the Taj Mahal. He drinks cold soda from the refrigerator, takes the luxury of hot showers. When Gabrielle comes home, she curls up next to him on the futon, plants a single kiss on his forehead, and silently watches reruns with him — always holding him close — until they drift off.

So the next seven days pass.

The rhythms of life at Gabrielle's apartment both disturb and comfort Derleth. He's never had any predictability in his life, not since he left Mother behind. It's all been standing at the backs of restaurants asking about dishwasher jobs, looking for clean dumpsters in the hopes of a rainless sleep, thumbing for rides and hoping he won't have to break some horny trucker's nose tonight.

Yet the idea that life could resume a pattern also means there's something new to be taken away.

"So what was it like?" she finally asks as the credits roll on another episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. She stays admirably calm as Derleth's muscles tense, offering a steady embrace, neither clenching him into a trap nor offering an easy escape.

It frightens him, how much he wants to hit her.

It frightens him more that she might like that.

"I don't have to answer that," Derleth hisses.

"No." She rests her head on his shoulder. "You don't."

Another *Everybody Loves Raymond* starts up. He doesn't answer her until *Seinfeld*'s second commercial break.

"Mother got the urge to get with God before I was born," he exhales, quickly, like the smoke from a first cigarette. "She drove off deep into the desert, put up a shack, got to worshipping."

Gabrielle nods. Derleth feels guilty, letting her fill in the gaps. He's not saying who Mother worshipped, or how.

"Food was scarce," he continues, picking his way through it. "She'd go on walkabouts for days, headed to town — sometimes she'd return with buckets of rotten fruit she stole from CostCo, sometimes she'd cruise back in a car with the other crazy survivalists and unpack a trunkful of MREs… and sometimes she'd wander back empty–handed, sunburnt and babbling. I don't think anyone really knew we were out there."

Gabrielle nods. Did she understand what he meant by "worship"? His mother was not quite a whore, as her whole goal in life was to birth the lamb that would destroy the world… but some of the guys felt like they owed her something anyway. Sometimes it was food, sometimes they'd hold tongue–tied lessons in reading or survival or shooting for Derleth and all of his brothers; reclusive, sweat–stained men reduced to stammering by a crowd of children. But whenever Derleth had asked one of these temporary father figures to stay, they'd brayed brittle laughs and patted him on the head.

Eventually, Derleth had realized: his mother was the crazy one among a bunch of crazies.

"Did you have a lot of brothers?" she asks. Derleth locks up: *how could she know?* Maybe Gabrielle worships the Goddess too, this comfort is her attempt to breed him…

"My Mom was a Quiverfull," Gabrielle adds quickly. "I don't think I ever saw her not pregnant. Or trying to."

Derleth laughs bitterly. Their lives overlap in all the wrong ways. She *thinks* she survived an awfulness. How can he stay, when this girl knows nothing of life? Part of him wants to choke her, to teach her the violence Mother did to him —

She senses the tension. "How many brothers did you have?" she asks, as if the answer is obvious —

— the baby is dead on the ground, ants marching across its shriveled eyes. Derleth has been apologizing to the baby for hours now, heaving with dry tears, knowing a cup of water might have saved it. Mother has been on walkabout for ten days, and the cisterns are all empty. All his brothers are huddled under the tin shack, seeking coolness in hot shadows; all of them are dying.

The youngest is dead. Again. Mother had stopped giving them names.

They'd had food, endless crates of granola bars. What they'd lacked was water. Derleth, the eldest, tried everything he could, shoving his useless man–nipples into the child's horrifically dry mouth, cutting cactus up and squeezing dribbles of water out, even gathering scrub brush in hopes of boiling some of the rancid fluid pooled in the sewage pit. And when the baby had died, he'd still held it to his chest in disbelief until he realized its skin was cooking in the desert sun.

Now it's on the ground. He does not know what to do. His remaining surviving brothers mewl in the shade, hoping not to join the other desiccated bodies in the desert. Derleth wonders how in hell he can save them.

He looks up, hearing the usual nonsense syllables of Mother calling to the Goddess. She strides back across the desert, dragging three canisters of stolen soda syrup. He grabs up the baby, ants and all, thrusts it into her arms.

"Look what you did!"** he screams. **"You did this!"

She looks down at the dead child. Her mouth forms a surprised "O," as if he had handed her a Mother's Day gift; she bares cracked teeth at him in a grin. She bobs her head slowly at first, then nods in a vigorous raver's nod.

*"Yes." She licks the syllable with pleasure. "I did this. **I** did this? I **did** this!" She hoists her dead child in her hands, flinging it into the air over and over again in a ghastly game of whoops–the–baby, its tiny hands flopping lifelessly.*

Derleth assaults her. But Mother's body isn't short–circuiting due to dehydration. She slaps him aside, hurls the baby over her shoulder, then hauls the syrup over to the shed, her belly distended, ready to birth again —

"How many brothers?" He rolls away from Gabrielle's embrace to face the wall. "The numbers changed. Up and down. All the time."

She sucks in a quivering breath. "I know bad," she assures him, placing a tentative hand on his shoulder. "My Dad did things to me —"

"Your Dad was a pussy." He slams his head into the baseboard, blinding sharp memories with sharper pain.

"*Hey*," she snarls, a furious command. She yanks him onto his back, slaps him hard enough that Derleth sees a spray of his blood fan out

against the wall. The adrenaline shock of *impending fight* floods his system, he buries his knee into her gut —

She grabs his chin and kisses him, their mouths filling with salt–sweet blood. She straddles him as the adrenaline shifts to need, and punching her is the only safe way to touch her, and she's slapping him and snarling what a stupid, Hell–bound sinner he is —

She pushes her pants to one side, placing a hand between her legs to shield Derleth from the sight of it. As she lowers herself onto him, Derleth freezes, wanting this wetness, terrified by the implications —

"I can't get pregnant," she assures him, suddenly vulnerable. "Not any more."

And oh God it is soft and beautiful and he looks up at the real Goddess, not some tangle of fecund slime but a smiling young girl with a freshly–blackened eye and perfect breasts, and instead of punching he brushes his fingertips against her skin, afraid she might vanish with the contact, but she clasps his palm to her chest as she rolls her hips to bury them both in pleasure, whispering it's all right, it's all right.

And when he comes, it is as obliterating as any moment in the pit, losing himself in orgasmic anesthesia. When she collapses against him afterwards he sinks into her flesh and enters a deep and dreamless slumber.

§

Gabrielle has quit her job so they can drive out to Arizona in Gabrielle's rackety car. They've been consulting maps for three days. She hasn't asked him any questions, which is good: all he'd been able to tell her was, "I have to know if she's still there."

Then, to get to Mother's old home, they have to walk. He's only made this journey once, in the other direction, headed towards town instead of fleeing it. They sleep on sandy rocks, shivering in the desert cold, ill–prepared. Gabrielle is braced for impact the whole time.

And then they're there.

He finds it more by memory than landmark; there wasn't much here to begin with. Derleth's clued in by a scattering of sun–faded granola

wrappers caught in tangles of thorns, the dark spot of the dried–up sewage pit.

He does not want to dig in the sewage pit, but he needs to know for sure. Derleth kneels, shoves his hand into the grave — his fingers grip dead bone. Mother's body. He sighs, relieved —

— Mother would gather the children around, spinning grand stories about the day she would call the Goddess back to destroy the planet, pointing at the clouds and telling them exactly what it would look like. Sometimes she forgot words, lapsing into ululations for hours on end. The children shivered, terrified to move, as Mother described all the different places where people had been cruel to her, and how violently each person there would die once she brought the Goddess back.

One of the littlest talkers — Mother had stopped giving them actual names — unwisely speaks up.

"But the Goddess will save us, right?" he asks.

Mother shakes her head, amused.

"The Goddess loves nothing," she tells him. "You all die."

As his brother begins to wail, Derleth feels the fury welling up inside of him. Why would Mother get to have all the revenge, and not Derleth?

Before he knows it, he has leapt on Mother. Is strangling her. He expects to be swatted away, then tied to the ground until his brothers free him. That is how it works.

Yet he is surprised to find how big he has gotten. She goes over, borne down by his weight. He hasn't tried to fight her in years, and Mother has gotten old. He wraps his fingers around her neck as his brothers flail at his shoulders, begging him to stop…

…and Derleth cannot stop smiling.

The fear glistening in her eyes as he strangles her is his fear mirrored, and it has been all along. She's not powerful. She's a nothing, so unseen that she disappeared from the earth one day and no one noticed, someone to be kicked or screamed at or fired by anyone who damn well felt like it. She went to the desert to birth her own squadron of people to abuse because pain was the only proof that she ever affected anyone, and even then she could only hurt soft things that couldn't fight back...

That was why Mother needed the Goddess — if she destroyed the world, she'd at least have done ***something****…*

“What can you hurt?” Derleth screams, over and over again, relishing her struggles, drunk on her dying. “Goddess cunt! Goddess cunt! What can you ***hurt****?”*

The answer is nothing. ***He*** *can hurt.* ***He*** *can destroy, now. And for the first time in his life, Derleth is potent. He’s not just killing her — he’s showing her just how little she matters, shatters the brief illusion of relevancy she cobbled together by fleeing out here, showing her even the weakest of things can strangle and rob and rape her.*

This is Derleth’s fondest memory.

He dumps her in the sewage pit, warns the kids that if they ever speak a word about Mother, she’ll come back and eat them. It’s thrilling how easily they believe him. He storms out across the desert, knowing that he now walks Mother’s paths, set to find a cop and lie about his mother disappearing on walkabout, about the orphaned kids huddled in the desert…

—“They don’t get up again,” Gabrielle reassures him, words with the weight of knowledge underneath them. “You think they’re so powerful, they’ll rise from the grave after you kill them. But…” She shrugs. “Dead is dead.”

Suspicions blossom, then guilt. He wonders what things her father did to her. “So you…”

“You always think the horror is yours,” she says. “And it is. But… there’s a lot of overlap between awfuls. I know some of what you went through. And you know some of mine. Or else you wouldn’t have…”

She flutters her hand weakly towards the grave, as though it barely matters.

Derleth squints as the sun sets: two murderers on a vast desert, sharing confessions. Except Gabrielle is not a murderer, not in spirit; she’s sunny with dark streaks. Compassionate in a way that makes Derleth shudder to think such caring might exist inside of him. “So how do you…?”

“I keep the good stuff and throw the bad away,” she tells him. “That’s how I survived.”

Derleth realizes his wandering has been an attempt to throw the bad stuff away. He’d loved that power of killing, craved it — but that was Mother growing inside him, a thing he had to starve and kill by starving and killing himself…

“I had no good stuff,” he mutters.

She laughs. “People like you and me don’t start with good stuff. We have to make it. One memory at a time.”

Derleth looks down at Mother’s grave, a dry body in a desert, forgotten. All her crazed attempts to create immortality led only to her worst dreams coming true. There was no Goddess, no tentacles in the sky; only human beings, perpetuating their own horrors.

Or kindnesses.

“So what do you do now?” Gabrielle asks.

Derleth takes her hand.

Ferrett Steinmetz has been published in *Asimov's*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, and *Escape Pod*, among others. He spent twenty years locked in an ugly writer–hibernation, getting nowhere, until the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop provided the cheat code to his secret writer–power. Later on, he picked up a magic mushroom boost at the Viable Paradise Workshop. He lives in Cleveland with his wife, a small black dog of indeterminate origin and too much energy, and a friendly ghost. He blogs entirely too much about puns, polyamory, and politics at www.theferrett.com. His twitter handle is @ferretthimself.

Interview with Ferrett Steinmetz

Maggie Slater

After being bitten by a radioactive writing bug at the 2008 Clarion Writer's Workshop, Ferrett Steinmetz found his writing career wholly transformed into something with intense focus, buff craft–muscles, and the ability to scale previously impossible publishing walls. Since 2008, his work has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Shimmer*, and *Escape Pod* among many other publications, and in 2011 was nominated for a Nebula for his novelette, "Sauerkraut Station."

This issue of *Apex Magazine* brings you Mr. Steinmetz's skin–crawling tale of doomsday worship and unexpected allies in "The Cultist's Son." We also got a chance to catch up with Mr. Steinmetz to discuss imposter syndrome, editing, H.P. Lovecraft, among many other subjects (including some better left under the rug).

About "The Cultist's Son":

APEX MAGAZINE: First, the perfunctory question: What was the initial spark that made you want to write this story?

FERRETT STEINMETZ: Interestingly enough, this story started as a commission for The Drabblecast, who asked me to write a story for their H.P. Lovecraft month. And I'd written a *lot* of Lovecraftian fiction — I'd say about a quarter of my short stories have Lovecraftian elements — so I really thought hard.

And what bothered me about "traditional" Lovecraft was that the cultists were always these null–sets — just props, cheerfully throwing away their lives for no good reason. And being someone who suffers from depression, I hate it when "madness" is used as a generic excuse to have people do random things. People who are crazy are still operating off principles and axioms — theirs have just skewed sideways, is all.

So I asked: "Why would anyone ever worship a thing that actively wants to destroy them?"

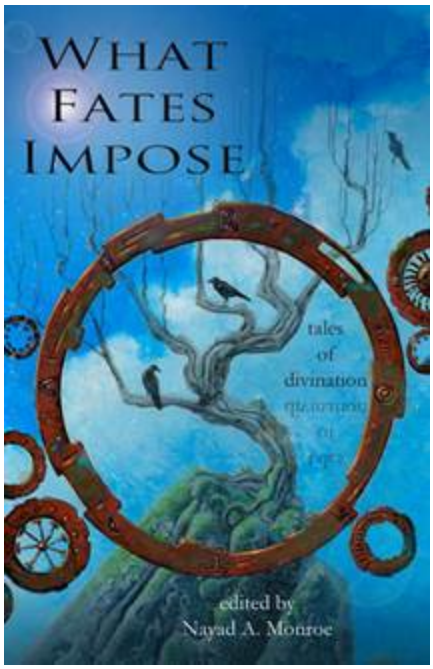
I thought about that… and when I finally came up with a good reason why someone would worship Shub–Niggurath, I realized the story was far more interesting if told from the perspective of someone who'd survived that madness, who'd had it inflicted upon them. And so this all squirted out in one black week.

And I sent it in, and the Drabblecast went, "Whoa! We're… we're PG–rated. This is… it's X–rated. We love it, but we can't take that. Can you write us another story?" So I did, and I pounded out "Hollow As The World" — but man, I loved this story. I took some more time to redraft it. And I was *really* glad when one of my favorite magazines ever took it.

(WOO FIRST SALE TO APEX: ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED.)

AM: "The Cultist's Son" has a central Lovecraftian vein. Who doesn't love the description of a tentacled alien doomsday goddess and Derleth's obsessed, priestess–like mother? What initially drew you to the work of H.P. Lovecraft and/or what is it about his style or ideas that inspires you to include some of this in your own fiction?

FS: What I love about Lovecraft is that central horror of realizing that we're not designed to look straight at the universe. That's become increasingly obvious as I've been watching my five–year–old goddaughter struggle with brain cancer — it's so horrible, and so biological, and so inevitable that our brains skitter right off of it. It's PTSD; if you keep staring at that abyss, it will destroy you.



But yeah, a lot of my stories play with that horror. Shadow Transit, Riding Atlas, “Black Swan Oracle” — all of them suggest maybe it’s better not to know.

It probably isn’t.

AM: Derleth and Gabrielle’s relationship in this story is a volatile one, incorporating some physical abuse, but within the context of both of their upbringings, this is both not surprising and rather understandable, and doesn’t cross that line into violence for violence sake. How did you approach the development and writing of this complex relationship between the characters? Were there any potential pitfalls in that process that concerned you while you were writing it or editing it?

FS: Man, all of them.

This story depressed the hell out of me when I wrote it, and I was *so* glad when I stumbled to the end and I found a happy ending. And I kept thinking, “Really, you’re *writing* this?!”

But one of the things I really wanted to emphasize was that yeah, Gabrielle is not a victim. She was. And she's determined not to be again. And there's some violence, but she initiates it both times, and both times as a purposeful way of drawing Derleth out, and hopefully if I've done it right people realize that it's the only intimacy they're really comfortable with.

AM: You've mentioned in other interviews that you often take several drafts to get a work of fiction to its final stage. Was this also true for "The Cultist's Son," and if so, was there a major plotting, structural, or stylistic issue you found in the editing process of earlier drafts that you could share with us, and what you did to fix it?

FS: This one went through about four drafts, and the central plotting stayed consistent — it was just shaping the tone and the details. I liken my drafting process to watercolors, because at first it's just a big smear of emotions, and then I go over it and say, "Wait, if I was standing at this bar I'd probably think about *this*," and then I keep adding little reactions — all the reactions that make the story unique, actually. Starts as a watery blur, ends with something hopefully more focused.

But Josh Morrey gave me a fantastic piece of advice that changed the whole tone: "You tell us up–front that Mother's dead," he said. "Don't do that. Let us wonder what happened to Mother, use it to pull us through, and then zap us in the climax."

Damn if the man wasn't right.

About Writing in General:

AM: On your blog, you've started a running series of breaking down first chapters of novels you've loved to analyze why they work. What made you decide to do this blog series, and how's it been going?

FS: Really well. I can't do it every day, but at this point I'm at #4 and I hope to get to twenty.

Basically, I did it because I am not good with opening chapters, and I'd like to sell a novel some day. My opening chapters tend towards this gush of worldbuilding at the cost of emotional investment, and so I wanted to read books where I knew how everything turned out, and see where they started.

It's fascinating, honestly. It's kind of like a guessing game, where I know what happens, and ask, "Where would I start telling this story?" And I'm wrong. I'm usually *so wrong*.

And it's a *good* kind of wrong. It's the kind of wrong where you get that little laugh of surprise and go, "Oh, of *course* you'd start there!" but you wouldn't think to do it.

AM: You've also recently discussed "impostor syndrome" and the stifling challenges writers face when viewing the industry in a hierarchical model. I think that's fabulous, because it seems like one of those guilty secrets a lot of beginning writers (and maybe not so beginning, at that!) struggle with as they attempt to build their own writing career. What do you do to combat it for yourself so that it stays out of the way when you're writing?

FS: I have a technique I call "Write without hope." I spit in the face of self–esteem; you don't have to feel good, you have to get the words on the page.

Because when I write, I often think, "This is crazy, this is over the edge, this is awful, nobody's ever going to buy this." (Especially when I'm typing phrases like, "The Goddess's cunt is black as ebon.") And I push all that aside, telling myself that it doesn't matter how bad the story is objectively, what matters is that I make it as good as I possibly can.

And the thing is? That story is often *way* better than I think it is. I thought this story was unsalable. I thought "Sauerkraut Station" was unsalable — 16,000 words of a girl making sauerkraut in space — and that was my Nebula nomination.

So keep writing, kids. Don't hate yourself; hate the story. And if you don't revise that blasted tale until it's as good as you can make it, *the story wins*.

AM: You've said in other interviews that attending the Clarion Writer's Workshop rebooted your writing career and showed you everything you'd been doing wrong before. What was some of the habitual or stylistic baggage you brought with you to Clarion from those previous two decades that you had to liberate yourself from in order to become the writer you are today?

FS: Basically, Clarion flensed me of the concept of "good enough." I've always been a decent writer. I could put together a story that people would read to the end of.

That's, like, 80% of the stuff in the slush pile.

To get published, you have to be so goddamned ruthless with yourself. I'd be, "Eh, that description will do," and then eighteen people would tell me they didn't feel rooted in the story's location. I'd be, "Oh, that dialogue doesn't matter" — and it mattered.

A story is not one success. It's a hundred successes — you get the dialogue right, you get the prose right, you get the plot right, you get the tone right, you get the ending right, and so forth. And if you're lucky, you get maybe forty, fifty of those right — and that's a good story.

But you have to be merciless. You have to hammer every aspect of your story and make it as good as you can. Because you're going to fail on so many levels, you cannot afford to slack on the shit you can do better.

Like I said: 80% of the stuff in the slush pile is readable. You need to be in the top 1%. That involves really pushing yourself.

AM: You've done a lot of related–to–writing work, beyond just your own fiction endeavors (I'm thinking here of both slush work (for Apex, no less!) and your own blog). How do you balance extracurricular writing

with the time you need for your short stories and novels, without letting the former take over the latter?

FS: I blog for about a half an hour a day, usually at night, writing something for the next day. That's usually the fun bit. My blog posts get comments and feedback, it's like my own personal forum thread.

Then I usually write for about ninety minutes a night. That happens after work, if I have a commitment in the evening. Or late at night.

Then I crit stories, if I have 'em.

Surprisingly, I manage to have a life around this, but those three hours of writing and critting and blogging? I protect them like a wild lion. They *are* happening. If I know I've got a hot date, I plan the writing around that.

The world does not want you to be a writer. It wants you to waste your life on laundry and picking up medications and chores.

Kill the world, and take up your mantle as a writer.

AM: What is your ideal writing environment like? What do you need to have near you (or, by contrast, very far away) to get your work done?

FS: I cannot have anything on in the background when I write. I hate this. All my author friends are all like, “You know what’s the most awesome thing to write to? The Pacific Rim soundtrack!” and I am downstairs, in isolation, wishing I could have some goddamned Skrillex on.

I need quiet. My internal voices do not shout; they mutter. I must bend over to hear them.

AM: What are you currently reading, fiction or non–fiction? Any recommendations?

FS: Currently, I’m reading an ARC of Robert J. Bennett’s *City of Stairs*, and I pretty much love everything Robert Bennett does. (Try *American Elsewhere*.) I also had my head blown off by Rae Carson’s *Girl of Fire and Thorns* trilogy, which is like George Martin writing YA princess fantasy. And I finished Peter Watts’ latest short story collection *Beyond the Rift* — I think “The Things” is one of my favorite short stories ever.

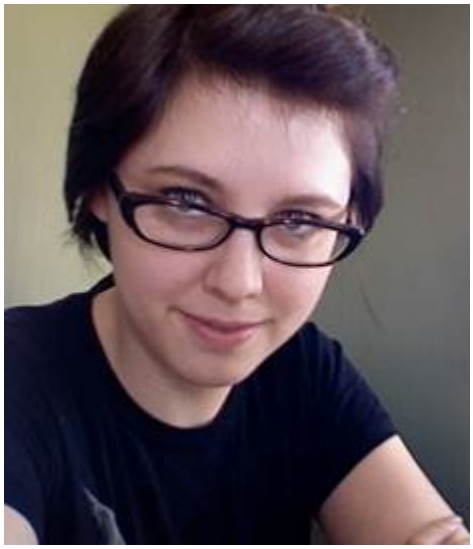
AM: All right, I’ve got to ask: in your bio you mention that you live with “a friendly ghost.” Could you expand on that, because I’m dying of curiosity!

FS: I cannot.

AM: What can we look forward to seeing from you in the coming months?

FS: *Escape Pod* just picked audio rights to my story “Black Swan Oracle,” which will be coming out — I’m totes excited, as they always do awesome work and their forums are filled with great feedback. And my preacher–faces–zombies flashfic “In Extremis” will be out in *Space and Time* shortly.

AM: Thank you so much, Mr. Steinmetz, for sharing “The Cultist’s Son” with us here at *Apex Magazine*, and for this glimpse behind the curtain!



Maggie Slater writes in Portland, where she lives with her husband and two old, cranky cats. She has seen her work published in a variety of venues, such as *The Storyteller Magazine*, *Fantastical Visions IV* and the anthology *Dark Futures: Tales of Dystopian SF*, from Dark Quest Books. She currently moonlights as an assistant editor for Apex Publications. For more information about her and her current writing projects, visit her blog at maggiedot.wordpress.com.

Unlabelled Core c. Zanclean (5.33 Ma)

Michele Bannister

I am the anchor to every oracle.
Rock records all replies, endlessly
overwritten. Chip–voiced, lies layered as gypsum dust
over tones that cut like calcite. Incisive;

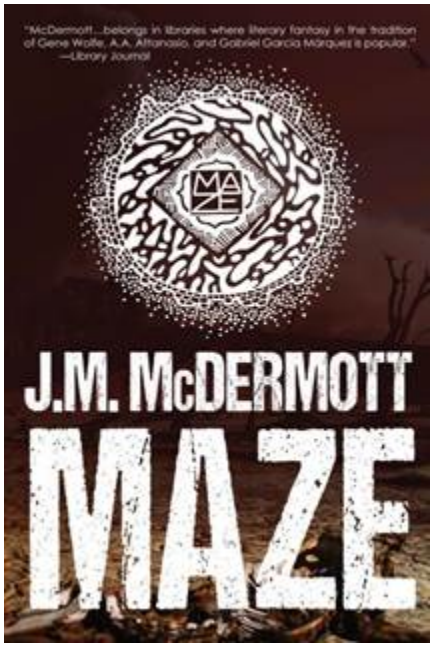
dug kilometres deep into the desiccated rift,
Nile and Rhone remember ripples at their deltas.
Whispers in the time before myth, echoing
on eye–searing white across an endless cauldron.

Gibraltar's gates opened into the heart of the ocean.

Well below all sunk ships
left lyre–boned for the flashing rhythms of fish,
the gentle shores, swallowed ten metres a day,
shelve to the sill of Sicily, beset by questions:

asking after the mood of drowned sagebrush,
slipped under the windwoven waves, silent still
and sleeping.

Born in the year of Halley's Comet, Michele Bannister spends her days chasing yesterday's light. She currently lives in British Columbia. Her poetry has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Stone Telling*, *Goblin Fruit*, and other venues, and in the *Here, We Cross* anthology (2012).


"McDermott...belongs in libraries where literary fantasy in the tradition of Gene Wolfe, A.A. Attanasio, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez is popular."
—Library Journal
J.M. McDERMOTT
MAZE

Maze
By J.M. McDermott

From every corner of time and space, sometimes people go missing without a trace. They never come back.

Get lost in the long stone halls of the maze with the ones that find each other, form tribes, scrape out a life from rocks and sand. Their stories interweave. Maia Station is a scientist ripped from stasis, but she has no tools to test the way things are. Instead, she raises her daughter as best she can and survives. Wang Xin once had his head dipped in water, and a djinni in the water entered his eye. He sees the future, exactly as it was supposed to be if he hadn't seen the light, but it does him no good in the life he has. In a world much like our own, Joseph comes home from a ten year high school reunion and encounters a light in the darkness. The light speaks.

My name is Jenny. Put me in your lung.
Breathe deep.

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Apex Publications

Tell Me the World is a Forest

Chris Lynch

Tell me in the forest there are mushrooms and typewriters.
Tell me mushrooms taste good and typewriters never rust.
Tell me how typewriters spawn like fireflies at lunar eclipse, how they settle down like ash among mushrooms and moss.
Tell me you'll show me.
Tell me there's a temple where girls go to cut themselves — and once a century the bloodflower blooms.
Tell me you picked it.
Tell me you ran through the forest.
Tell me what chased you.
Tell me you climbed.
Tell me you slept in wet branches.
Tell me you woke in the night, looked down in the moonlight, saw a wild man watching birds peck the keys deliberately.
Tell me there's no way home.
Tell me you drank from the flower, went deeper and deeper.
Tell me spiders spin wires.
Tell me birds know the future.
Tell me you've forgotten how we met and why we're here.
Tell me the spiders are listening.
Tell me all about chameleons and tigers, stomach–brooding frogs and giant moths, and microbats that roost safely in carnivorous plants.
Tell me to listen to insects, to strange cries, to the far away whoops of gibbons.
Tell me someone's been feeding the typewriters paper.
Tell me that in one thousand years the papermakers will be priestesses, and all the temples will be libraries.
Tell me what slumbers in mist.
Tell me how spiders eat birds when they fly down to type, how every page that is finished is spattered in the sound of the struggle.
Tell me everyone gets eaten eventually.
Tell me when I embrace you, hesitantly, when my feet cleave into

hooves.
Tell me when quills sprout thick from your scalp, when my neck lengthens, and your soft–breasted pelt.
Tell me you'll wait for my snout before touching my face.
Tell me you're a woman.
Tell me I look good in stripes.
Tell me my clothes must've got lost sometime.
Tell me these stones are the ruins of libraries.
Tell me no one knows what all the words mean anymore — maybe they used to.
Tell me I found you in the branches.
Tell me what branches are.
Tell me everything's okay.
Tell me the world is a forest.
Tell me in the forest there are spiders and birds, mushrooms and typewriters, that spiders taste good, and typewriters never rust.
Tell me the typewriters are hungry.
Tell me we have to find paper.
Tell me you'll sleep on my back.
Tell me we'll never stop changing.
Tell me I'm just making this up.

Chris Lynch is a writer and teacher based in Brisbane, Australia. His poetry has appeared in *The Stars Like Sand*, *Eye to the Telescope*, and *Star*Line*, among others. At work on a book about walking Japan, he blogs haiku at www.chrislynch.com.au and tweets more than he should as @thecityhermit.

Aristeia

Sonya Taaffe

Zeus with the migraine that was Athene
smashed his skull open on his stepson's maul,
split free a tall spear of a girl
as unbreachable as logic and beguiling as a myth
while the lag–footed blacksmith
glanced down at his burnt hands
and faded underground again.
A god who crashes once to earth
buries himself within it, forge–roaring Etna
and the tindery fields of Claudius' Ostia
hammering out the shape of fires to come,
lyre–lit Rome, the charred olives of Athens
and the armor that saved Achilles
as surely as a poem turns aside a bomb.
Get out of my head, older artificer,
take axe and tongs if you have to,
you cannot break this grip of pain on me.
I will smelt it fine as silver,
chase out wild leaves and Gorgoneia,
a dancing–floor running with ocean at the rim,
and hold it nightly against the deaths that gather
like inspirations, pecking to get in.

Sonya Taaffe's short fiction and poetry can be found in the collections *Postcards from the Province of Hyphens* (Prime Books), *Singing Innocence and Experience* (Prime Books), and *A Mayse–Bikhl* (Papaveria Press), and in anthologies including *Beyond Binary: Genderqueer and Sexually Fluid Speculative Fiction*, *The Moment of Change: An Anthology of Feminist Speculative Poetry*, *People of the Book: A Decade of Jewish Science Fiction & Fantasy*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *The Alchemy of Stars: Rhysling Award Winners Showcase*, and *The Best of Not One of Us*. She is currently senior poetry editor at *Strange Horizons*; she holds master's degrees in Classics from Brandeis and Yale and once named a Kuiper belt object. She lives in Somerville with her husband and their potential cat.

Repairing the World

John Chu

By the time Lila and Bridger arrived, the sitting room floor was already part savannah. Yellow grass grew on dirt where hardwood had once been. The border between grass and floor hissed and threw up sparks as the savannah crept towards the davenport on one side, the longcase clock on another and towards Lila on a third. On the fourth, the grass seemed to stretch through a wide hole in the far wall to a pale green horizon. The intrusion, however, couldn't have breached the far wall yet. The house hadn't collapsed. Lila ticked a mechanical dragonfly with the time, location and the nature of this intrusion, wound it up then threw it into the air. Its wings blurred as it weaved past Bridger, buzzed out the door, then back to the university.

She crawled around the room and laid a barrier of iridescent tape where the floor sparked into grass. The tape smothered the sparks into a diffuse light. When she was done, she could see the far wall from the door. Rather than stretching out for miles, the savannah had become a patch of grass on the floor ringed by a steady glow.

Her triumph lasted for all of a moment. Grass sprouted through the tape. The ring of diffuse light dispersed into sparks hissing through the air. The grass stretched again through the far wall to an unfamiliar horizon.

Lila walked around the savannah to the far wall. Where she ought to have seen Bridger, yellow grass lay under a green sky. A good few feet of floor lay between the savannah and the sitting room's walls. Her other formulation of tape sat in her pack. She could still test that if she worked quickly.

"Lila, this time, you didn't even slow the intrusion." Bridger's words rumbled across the floor. "Seal it the right way so I can go."

"You're unusually impatient. Some place you need to be?"

The savannah grew towards Lila. She worked her way back towards Bridger, careful not to touch the grass. On some other world, a piece of hardwood floor covered with iridescent tape intruded on a yellow savannah. She'd rather not join the floor on that one–way trip.

A guttural roar swept across the grass. Bridger roared back.

"Who is it, Bridger?" The davenport blocked her way. Grass now brushed against it leaving her no floor to walk on.

“From only one sample? How the hell should I know what that roar meant?”

Never mind the linguist understood more often than not. Lila would swear he was fluent in every language that had ever intruded. Not that he ever admitted that.

“What is it with you today?”

“That roar might be in a language, or it could just be noise. If you seal the intrusion now, we won’t have to waste time finding out.”

“The linguist doesn’t want to discover a new language?” She shoved the davenport towards Bridger, hoping to create a narrow aisle between the grass and wall. “Fine. If you’re in that much of a hurry —”

Something flashed across the savannah. Lila scrambled over the davenport only to find Bridger hefting a bear–like creature across his shoulders. His legs shook for precisely three seconds before he stood up straight. Otherwise, someone might decide he was absurdly strong and he couldn’t have that. Lila didn’t see the point of the charade. Bridger looked like he’d never met a weight he hadn’t lifted.

“Is it dead?” Lila hadn’t heard any struggle. Neither blood nor any other liquid dripped onto Bridger’s leather jacket.

“Of course.” Bridger glared down at her. Given that a large, furry animal with sharp claws lay across his shoulders, his glare was even more effective than usual. “That’s what linguists do.”

Linguists were prepared to deal with any beings that intrusions might bring with them. Ideally, this meant finding a way to communicate. Sometimes, this meant killing the feral beast that charged at you. Despite the arsenal hidden on his body, Bridger had wrestled the beast to death and in record time.

“Bridger, you’re behaving strangely, even for you.” Lila stepped back. “What is so important that you have to leave right now?”

“I need to…” Bridger pursed his lips. “Go have a drink.”

Bridger had witnessed every trial in the seven years her research had taken so far. She hadn’t improved how to seal intrusions, but she had learned how to read Bridger. He was hiding something and he knew she knew that.

“A drink?” She held him with an expectant gaze.

“How I live my life is how I live my life.” He walked away. “You just seal that intrusion. I’m putting this beast in the truck. Some zoologist at

the university will want to study it. Be back in a minute."

Lila sighed. Talking to him would have been so much simpler if he'd just admit that he sought the intimate company of other men. She understood why he wouldn't. The police went undercover to entrap that sort of man then charge him with solicitation. No gentleman should be so unbecoming. Not that they considered Bridger pale enough to be a gentleman. Or her to be a lady.

The police always took one look at her then suggested she return her gear to the gentleman who was surely its real owner. Even seeing her credentials, they blustered about arresting her for unauthorized possession. Lila didn't keep much faith with the police or what anyone thought unbecoming.

Her pack lay against the door Bridger had left through. She hefted out a visor, a sander, a bottle of sealant and an iron. The visor covered her face and blocked her ears. Inch by inch, she filled then polished the border between grass and floor. The iron arced lightning across the border, cauterizing the sealant. The sander spun, throwing sparks as it ground the border down. Sweat stung her eyes and soaked her clothes.

Sealing an intrusion the right way, as Bridger called it, required years of university study. If the tape had worked, anyone who found an intrusion could seal it right away rather than sending a dragonfly for help. The world could keep up with the ever accelerating rate other worlds have been intruding into this one. Of course, the tape had been useless and the sitting room floor would be a field of yellow grass once she was done.

Bridger returned. The weight of his impatience felt heavier than the iron and sander combined. After she'd sealed the intrusion, he left, grumbling about the waste of time.

§

A pond had intruded into the pub and been sealed since the last time Lila visited. After renovations, the owners rechristened the pub *Sapir's Wharf*. A linguist pub whose name didn't pun on words imported from one intrusion or another was apparently beyond the pale. A broad swath of clear liquid too viscous to be water ran the length of the pub. Wooden

decks lined each side. Rowboats swayed with the pond's lazy swells. Stout attendants ferried customers to and from tables and chairs set on floating platforms. Some linguist encased in battle armor insisted on rowing his party across the pond himself.

Bridger sat at the near deck. He was the one of the handful not visibly carrying weapons. A pile of books cluttered his table, held back only by the flight of transparent rainbow colored protein shots. Lila never understood why anyone drank the vile stuff. Bridger held a book in front of his face, pointedly not looking at a man on the pond. The object of Bridger's affection, ostensibly engrossed in a book of his own, was pointedly not looking back. Now that she noticed, their mutual attention was obvious.

Knowing Bridger, Lila bet the two men had been coming here to not look at each other for who knows how long. No wonder he had been so impatient for her to seal off that savannah last week. As far as she could tell, though, the only thing Bridger was getting out of this assignation was eye strain.

"It can't be time already for another wave of intrusions, Lila." Bridger downed the red vial. "Besides, I'm busy."

"When am I ever wrong about this?"

Bridger pursed his lips then made a show of counting on his fingers. "Oh, about 26.6 percent of the time."

Lila put her hands on her waist. "That was a rhetorical question."

"Yes, I know. I'm a linguist" He downed the orange. "And still busy."

"Not looking at him? For how many weeks now?" Lila pulled a roll of tape out of her pack. It iridesced in the pub's dim light. "The review board mandated that I have a linguist stand by me."

Bridger gestured towards the rest of the pub. Half the customers wore helmets, goggles and camouflage. Both guns and swords sat in holsters that lay snug against their bodies. Zippers ran across their clothing like tracks at a rail interchange. Either these customers were trying far too hard or they were zipper fetishists.

"An *actual* linguist." Lila looked cross at Bridger. "There aren't enough certified linguists in the city, much less linguists I trust, to fill a bar."

"Find someone else." If Bridger didn't look at his intended any harder, his eyes would have popped out. He fanned the pile of linguistics texts on the table into a spiral. "I'm *busy*."

“I’ve tried. The linguists who’d agreed via dragonflies all suddenly remembered prior commitments the moment they saw me.” Her heart pounded in her ears and she fought to keep her voice steady. “You know how it goes.”

Bridger frowned. “Please. I…” He almost gave his intended a glance.

His intended rearranged the books on his table. They leaned against each other in a formation that should not have been stable. He paid just as much, or just as pointedly little, attention to Bridger. Surely, the two men wanted to meet rather than just play games.

She landed too quickly into a rowboat. Gravity was much stronger on the pond. The faster she pulled the oars, the harder the liquid became. Only when she rowed slowly did the oars slide the boat through the syrupy liquid. Bridger hadn’t tried to stop her. Then again, that would have shown he cared about the man on the pond. Instead, Bridger frantically rearranged the books on his table. Some of them now lay open overlapped by others.

The man was so busy not looking at Bridger, he hadn’t noticed Lila until she climbed onto his platform and collapsed into the seat opposite his. Her lungs burned. Her legs ached from the climb. She forced herself to breath deeply and slowly.

“Excuse me, but you’re making a certain linguist impossible to work with.” Lila placed a mechanical dragonfly on the table. “Pick a time and place to meet in private and I’ll pass the message on to him. No one will trace my dragonfly to you. Right now, I need you to go. You’re jeopardizing my dissertation.”

The man had packed his books into his bag as she spoke. He stood, looming the way Bridger did. His chair skidded back and the platform bobbled. He picked the bag up by its drawstring. It tightened the bag closed as he swung the bag onto his back. His gaze flicked to Bridger and his lips curved up slightly as he took the dragonfly. He nodded to Lila then jumped into the pond. The platform swayed and Lila gripped the table for support.

The liquid hardened beneath the man. He crossed the pond in heavy leaps. Conversation in the pub stopped, giving way to footfalls and a thump as he landed on the near deck. His exit left slack jaws, preening men and women trying too hard to look unimpressed and one glum Bridger, who downed shot after shot then slumped into his chair.

Conversation returned to the bar. Lila tried to stand, then decided to flag down a stout attendant. Retrieving Bridger had worked much better in theory than it actually had in practice.

§

Intrusion after intrusion fractured the sky. Shards of night and noon disrupted the dusk. As they had for days now, teams of sealers encased in propeller suits stanched the greens and pinks bleeding across the sky. Their sanders grinding against where intrusions met this world showered sparks that sent mechanical dragonflies scurrying. Turbulent clouds of messages bloomed around intrusions. Some of them fell in. Nothing ever returned from an unsealed intrusion.

Lila sat in the park watching propellerheads at work. No review board would ever let her experiment on intrusions that large, not that she had the equipment or even wanted to. Her goal now was to reach an intrusion just as it appeared. Small intrusions were becoming rare. The world seemed to be replaced more quickly with each wave.

This latest wave of intrusions didn't stop anyone from picnicking. No one was safer shut in at home. Hampers sat on blankets spread over the grass. Fathers tossed balls at their sons who batted them away or chased after them, mindful of the stretches of tar, concrete and whatever else that had intruded over the years. Mothers sat with their daughters sewing or knitting. Lila forced herself back to monitoring for intrusions.

Needles swayed back and forth on meters that lay in front of her. Something would intrude near here, eventually. She stuffed her meters into her pack. A watched intrusion never actually intruded, she'd swear.

Bridger sat on his haunches, indistinguishable from a rusted bronze statue, albeit a clothed one. His brow furrowed and his lips set downward as if he were straining to make out a dirge buried by the omnipresent and steady whine of propellers. Soot had darkened his jacket by the time Lila realized he wasn't just maintaining an over the top level of discipline.

"You're sulking." She managed to cut the triumph of revelation from her voice. "I'm sorry about your assignation, but if I knew exactly how things would work out, I wouldn't need you here."

“We’re not on speaking terms.” His low rumble sounded as if the ground had chosen to speak for him instead.

“Bridger, you’re so…” Lila snapped her fingers a few times as if that would make the right word appear. “What’s the word I’m thinking of…”

Bridger sighed too heavily. “Young.” He rested his elbows on his thighs and his face in his hands. “Not literally, of course.”

Anyone who had finished the course work and practical work required just to start the certification trials was no longer young. Bridger was one of the rare few who had completed the trials early, but only by two years.

“That’s it.” She pointed at him. “You have the emotional maturity of a precocious thirteen year old.”

“And I suppose soliciting the man for me is the height of mature behavior.” The disapproval in his gaze crushed her lungs. “You could have been arrested.”

“How often do you distract intruders away from me?”

“Not the same thing.” He was now staring at a chunk of concrete just in front of him. “Doesn’t matter. I’ll never see him again.”

“Oh, Bridger.” The linguist was being melodramatic, but Lila knew better than to say that. “I’m sure he sent the dragonfly. With all the intrusions, it probably got lost and fell into another world.”

“So Ashen thinks I don’t want to meet him. Great.” He stood. “Thank you for making me feel so much better.”

Lila ignored the verbal jab. “Ashen? How do you know his name?”

Ashen was an oddly descriptive name for Bridger’s intended. Certainly, no one would describe either Bridger or Lila as ashen.

“‘Ashen’ may have just been an adjective. We were still constructing our shared language.” Bridger rolled his shoulders and stretched his neck. “The spatial grammar of stuff on the table wasn’t done yet.”

“You two were flirting by collaborating on a constructed language?” Lila wondered if maybe she was just too stupid to recognize when Bridger was toying with her.

“What sort of policeman would go to the trouble of learning linguistics just to entrap the few male linguists who could find him attractive? There are easier ways to entrap supposedly depraved men.”

“So you’re certain that Ashen’s a linguist then.”

“He might be, but I’ll never know.” Bridger crossed his arms and glared down. He looked like a rockslide about to fall on her. “Some doctoral

candidate decided Ashen and I needed to meet before I could be sure.”

The air buzzed around her. A smattering of dragonflies rushed up from the picnickers then across the sky. Bridger’s gaze shifted past her shoulder as she turned around. A shimmering line writhed just above a patch of grass. People scattered from the motley park.

Lila and Bridger ran against the tide. The park was a field of discarded picnic hampers, blankets, bats and balls by the time they reached the intrusion. Lila reached behind for her pack only to find Bridger handing it to her. He didn’t resist the opportunity to purse his lips and furrow his brow.

She hid the shimmer with a vertical strip of tape. A gauzy translucence floated where the intrusion once had. Lila walked in a circle around it.

“What now?” Bridger still looked as if he would spring at the translucence.

“We see how long the tape holds.” Lila fumbled through her pack for her meters. “We watch for side effects.”

Her meters’ needles swung wildly. The tape shattered. Iridescent specks flew in all directions. A shimmering line shot into the sky, branching into a gigantic tree of fire. Asphalt oozed out to replace the grass. Threads of black sky cut across the swathes of mostly blue.

A bolt of light shot out from the intrusion. It hit a slab of concrete next to Lila. She fell to the ground and raised her hands, shielding her head from the shower of fine gravel. A human–like body emerged onto the asphalt. No part of it was entirely metal or flesh. Its metal arm fused seamlessly into flesh fingers that gripped a shiny gun.

Bridger placed himself between it and Lila. He shouted at it, obviously switching from language to language, and listened for responses. Their words sounded like everything from a seized engine to an orchestra playing a fugue. Lila couldn’t tell if they’d found a language in common or if Bridger had worked out its language. When it shot again, he dodged then wrestled it onto the grass.

Men flying in propeller suits surrounded the intrusion. The whirring made it impossible to hear anything else. Heat and smoke filled the air. Sparks showered from above. Lila, coughing, stumbled to her pack. She grabbed her iron and sander. Bridger would let himself die before he’d admit he needed help.

By the time Lila reached the fight, the metal–flesh humanoid had Bridger in a death hug. Lila charged. She pushed her sander against the humanoid's back. Metal and flesh wore away, throwing dust and bits of burnt meat back at her. The humanoid bucked, throttling Bridger. She struck the humanoid's head with the glowing iron. Sparks crackled then arced away in all directions. The humanoid collapsed onto Bridger. The latter grunted and pushed the humanoid off him.

"How injured are you?" Lila realized too late that this was a pointless question.

"The soldier didn't take being marooned on this world very well." Bridger did his best imitation of not wincing as he sat up. "I don't suppose you could help me get him into the truck?" He gritted his teeth as he gestured towards the humanoid. "The university will want to examine him."

§

Slivers of day punctuated the otherwise night sky. They seemed to mirror the paths that criss–crossed the campus common. Part of Lila wished for more intrusions. The eerie light from above lit the common as little as the few gaslights that dotted paths. It'd been weeks since Bridger checked into the hospital and, as she had every night since, she walked home from her lab in near dark. As usual, thoughts of ways to seal intrusions disappeared, replaced by thoughts of how to get home in one piece.

A policeman walked on a path from her left. The two paths crossed just ahead of her. Lila's hand automatically went for her pocket. She was never without her student identification card, her proof that she wasn't trespassing. When he noticed her, he ran towards her. Lila forced herself to walk slowly, as if she hadn't noticed him.

"Lila!" The policeman knew her name. That didn't have to mean something. The campus was typically awash with pale men. Her presence was distinctive. "I thought that was you. Wait, we need to talk."

She'd done nothing wrong and she was entitled to be on campus. That seemed hard comfort at the moment. A gaslight stood near to the

intersection where their paths crossed. She waited there, her hands consciously away from her body. If she reached into her pocket now, the police might decide she was drawing some sort of weapon. Besides, they hated it when she presented her identification before they asked for it.

“Good evening, officer.” Lila spoke quietly, keeping her eyes downcast.

His shadow seemed to blot out half the common. If he wanted to hurt her, it wouldn’t be hard.

“Sorry, we’ve never been properly introduced.” He extended his hand. “I’m Ashen.”

Lila looked up. He was the man from the pub, complete with the bag strapped to his back by the drawstring looped around his shoulder. Only now, he also wore a police uniform.

Bridger’s prospective boyfriend was a policeman. This boded well for no one. As a policeman, of course, he could easily determine who she was from the dragonfly she’d given him.

Lila gave Ashen’s hand a gentle pulse. “What can I do for you, officer?”

“Please, call me Ashen.” He smiled. “Listen, I’m almost late for Morphological Theory. May I walk you to your dorm while we talk? It’s on the way to class.”

Apparently, at least one policeman would learn linguistics to entrap the few linguists who could be interested in him. Lila’s rib cage locked. She wouldn’t confirm Bridger’s secret, but not to walk with Ashen would be beyond suspicious. She nodded and they continued down the path.

“I know how this looks, but I won’t arrest you or Bridger.” His anxious face did nothing to uphold the dignity of his office. “If he doesn’t want to… meet me, I understand. I just need to know.”

Lila chose her words carefully. “Bridger has only just been released from the hospital. Besides, I never received a dragonfly from you.”

“You didn’t? That’s wonderful.” Ashen’s face lit. He flung his arms then dropped them as if he wanted to hug Lila but then thought better of it. “I need you to give him a message.”

He removed paper and a pencil from his pack. His brow furrowed and he scratched out his words several times as he scribbled his note.

“Ask him if he’ll meet me here.” Ashen looked so hopeful when Lila took the paper that she almost believed he wanted Bridger. “They will let him in. I’ll be hanged if there’s a man there who doesn’t prefer the company of like–minded men.” He flashed a smile at his own grim joke.

They stopped in front of her dorm. Ashen waved farewell then sprinted past her towards a building that was now ivy–strewn stone fused seamlessly into metal. Between Ashen's excitement and Bridger's moroseness, part of her thought the two men deserved each other. The rest of her didn't trust Ashen any farther than she could throw him.

Bridger seemed about as ready for a relationship as she was to defend her dissertation. If she passed on Ashen's note, Bridger might be hurt even if Ashen was sincere. Life would be so much simpler if it handed her only one problem at a time.

Lila studied Ashen's note. It wasn't in any language she understood. She folded the note then slipped it into a pocket. Vetting Ashen wasn't her job. Keeping Bridger from being impossible to work with didn't have to mean finding him a boyfriend. Despite her misgivings, Bridger could fend for himself on that front. He just needed someone to watch over him.

Her jaw dropped as that realization hit her. Using an iron and sander to seal intrusions required too much training and took too much time. It always worked but other worlds were starting to intrude too quickly and too often for propellerheads to keep up. Her dissertation didn't have to be a faster and easier way to seal intrusions. It could be something that kept the iron and sander method propellerheads used practical.

She ran back to the lab to reformulate her tape. Maybe this time, it would be good for something.

§

A translucent patch of tape floated just over the now empty sidewalk. Lila sat before it, her meters spread out before her. So far, so good. Propellerheads descended on her, their skin pale compared to the burns on the machinery they wore. That her credentials were in order didn't matter. Never mind that her research would eventually make their job easier. She had to deploy Bridger to make them leave her alone. They didn't find Bridger more credible and Bridger probably wasn't stronger than a man in propeller suit much less a team of them. However, he looked as if he didn't care who was more credible or who was stronger.

The tape was working, but the propellerheads cordoned off the block anyway. They clanked to the intersections on either side to wave away the traffic.

“So Ashen is a policeman.” Bridger turned the sheet of paper over and over in his hands. “And studying linguistics for no useful reason.”

The forging of linguists started at childhood. Any later, not to mention with less than full–time study, and the candidate had no chance of surviving the certification trials, much less passing.

“Maybe he just likes linguistics.” Lila kept her gaze on her meters. Still good. “He seemed excited that you hadn’t stood him up.”

“I can’t go anyway.” Bridger shrugged. “You need me here, just in case, right?”

Traffic blocked off, the propellerheads flew away. The air pulsed with heat and noise, both of which faded as they headed towards distant, new intrusions in the sky.

“I should wait an hour before I seal this for good just to make sure the tape holds. In the event of a fresh intrusion, that’s plenty of time for a team of sealers to arrive, but I can wait by myself.” She sneaked another quick glance at the sky. “It’s too busy a day for the propellerheads to bother me again any time soon. You go prepare to meet Ashen.”

“Prepare?” Bridger’s gaze narrowed.

“It’s a private club.” She’d bury her face in her hands if she weren’t monitoring the intrusion. “You might want to clean up. Put on your best suit, waistcoat and trousers.”

The tape stretched. The street behind it seemed to bend and twist, buckling towards Lila then away. Bridger fell on top of her. His body tightened, as if it were impervious to explosions.

“Get off of me.” Lila pushed him away. “That’s how it’s supposed behave you… well–meaning but over–reactive giant slab of highly intelligent bronze.”

To his credit, he gave to her shove. He immediately stood and backed away.

“This tape is more flexible.” She double–checked her meters, just to make sure Bridger wasn’t right. “It doesn’t try to seal the intrusion, just hold it off long enough for someone to arrive to seal it for good. The tape gives to relieve the pressure.”

“Oh.” Bridger’s shadow covered Lila. “But aren’t you supposed to have someone keep watch over you?”

For once, he looked like the creature of flesh and blood he actually was. He didn’t loom. His weight shifted ever so slightly between his feet. His gaze, though, remained on the tape, the expression on his face distant.

Bridger was afraid. Feral beasts, metal–fleshed soldiers, and anything else that intruded bothered him not in the least. A man who liked him, on the other hand, had him burrowed into his work. Lila bit down the urge to ask if fear was a new experience for him.

“Sure, but the review board hasn’t required anyone else to have a linguist stand by. Nothing’s going happen here. I have it right this time.” She pulled back the meters Bridger had knocked away. “Besides, if you’re walking into a trap, even under your best clothing, you wear enough weaponry to take out a small army, right?”

“That’s not funny. A linguist never tells.” Bridger smiled. “Thank you, Lila.”

The needles on her meters wobbled, but only slightly. The street behind the patch expanded and contracted like a breath held then released. Bridger walked away, heading to his lover. Lila sat alone on the concrete, her work for the first time in her own hands and no one else’s. If she was going to prevent other worlds from intruding, this world ought to be one worth preserving. As scattered dragonfly and sealers in their propeller suits crossed the skies, Lila kept watch, ready to repair the world.

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Juniper, Gentian, and Rosemary

Pamela Dean

The Hardy family moved in next door on a very bright day in October. There was some discussion, long after, about whether there had ever been a Hardy family, except for Dominic; but at the time everybody thought there was. Juniper and Gentian and Rosemary crowded into the bay window of their dining room, which conveniently overlooked the narrow driveway up which the unfortunate moving crew was carrying a lot of heavy–looking dark wood furniture. There were large mirrors with melted–looking gold frames, and no less than three grandfather clocks, and a huge number of boxes all of which made the people carrying them grunt and sweat and from time to time swear very loudly.

Gentian heard two phrases she had never encountered before, not even among the senior boys who smoked during lunch hour. She made a quiet bet with herself concerning when Juniper would choose to bring them out.

"It's grandparents," said Rosemary, in disgust. "That's all old grown–up stuff."

"Maybe they're just rich," said Juniper.

"They wouldn't be moving in next door to us if they were," said their mother from the table, where she was pretending to pay the bills. If she had really been paying them she would be swearing in German and throwing her pen across the room.

"If they are grandparents," said Gentian, "they might plant a lot of rosebushes and give us cookies."

"I give you cookies," said Juniper, affronted.

"You burn them."

"I cook them. You should just eat the dough, you —"

"Mom," said Rosemary, "would our grandparents have done that if we had any?"

"Cookies, probably," said their mother. "Your grandmother could kill a plant faster than anybody I ever knew."

"What about Daddy's mother?"

"She had mathematical hedges and cakes like a geometry diagram," said their father, coming in from the kitchen with a cup of coffee. He had filled it too full. Gentian bet with herself that he would spill three sploshes on the polished floor and one on the newly–shampooed carpet. He spilled two

on the floor and missed the carpet by moving so fast he slopped coffee on the table instead. Gentian owed herself either a large box of chocolate (not to be shared with her sisters) or a copy of Bullfinch's Mythology, depending on how her allowance was holding out, whether the Martins needed a babysitter this weekend, and whether Jamie Barrows smiled at her in gym class again.

"Well where are they?" said Rosemary, standing on Gentian's foot in an effort to see further. She was tiny and blond and very fetching, and although she professed that she hauled a footstool around with her, and hated having to do so, in fact she usually used somebody else to reach the high places.

"In the house directing the movers, stupid," said Juniper.

She was the tall and statuesque and beautiful sister, and she got away with saying many awful things because she had red hair and people liked to joke about her temper.

"I didn't see them go in," said Gentian, "and there's no car." She was the middle sister in all possible ways, including having gotten the freckles that ought to have belonged to Junie and the miserable sensitive skin that was Rosie's proper birthright. She had brown hair and boring, symmetrical features. She made up for these deficiencies by being clever.

In fact she wasn't as quick on the uptake as Rosemary or as good at mathematics as Juniper, but she read a great deal more than they ever bothered with, and could come out with peculiar facts or common–sense observations, as the situation warranted. Most people thought this was funny, but her father always thanked her gravely.

"You don't see everything, Genny," said Juniper, "even if you are as nosy as —"

"There isn't a car," said Gentian.

"Maybe they came in the van," said Rosemary, thoughtlessly. Gentian could see the precise moment in which she realized that she had been stupid, and watched her forestall Juniper's scathing comment with a shrill giggle. "Maybe they're vampires and they came in their coffins," said Rosemary.

"Those wooden chests!" said Gentian, collaborating happily.

"Vampire grandparents," said Juniper, relenting. "Watch your kittens when their grandchildren come to visit."

They pressed their foreheads to the glass and watched for coffins. A swirl of wind drove a shower of yellow leaves from their maple, and when it had subsided they saw a boy climb out of the truck.

“There, Junie!” said Rosemary. “A vampire grandchild.”

“Is he cute?” said their mother.

“His hair is black, his eyes are blue, his lips as red as wine,” said their father, reflectively. “Or do his teeth brightly shine?”

“He’s got black hair,” said Juniper. “Oh, God, Mom, he’s as tall as me.”

“He’s too old for you, then,” said her mother.

“Why should his teeth shine?” said Gentian, turning around and addressing her father. If the boy was too old for Juniper, she might as well forget him; and anyway he was probably like all the seniors.

“If he’s a vampire,” said her father.

On a dull day in November the vampire grandmother came to the back door and asked to borrow a snake. Rosemary, who answered the door, was thrown into utter confusion by this request. Gentian, doing her homework at the kitchen table because they were reading Poe’s stories and these scared her too silly to sit up in the attic by herself, looked up and saw a thin, gray–haired woman in blue clothes, squinting at the bewildered Rosemary.

“Is your drain clogged up?” said Gentian.

“I thought you used a fish for that,” said Rosemary.

“No, dummy, that’s for electrical work. Let her in, Rosie.”

The woman came in, blinking in the fluorescent light as if she didn’t much care for it. “I’m Mrs. Hardy,” she said. “We moved in next door.”

“I’m Genny,” said Gentian. She was embarrassed. Juniper had been pestering her parents to go over and welcome the new neighbors, but her father was not sociable and her mother had said she wasn’t going to bother people who were busy moving in just because her daughters had an obsession about vampires.

“This is Rosemary. Give her some coffee, Rosie, and I’ll get Mom.”

Mom, when gotten, managed to persuade Mrs. Hardy to sit down and drink her coffee, which was more than the dithering Rosemary had done. Gentian and Rosemary sat very quiet while the two women talked about the neighborhood and the dreadfulness of drains and the worse dreadfulness of plumbers. Gentian saw that the woman’s fingers were of the usual length with regard to one another, and that her canine teeth were

no more pointed than anybody else's. They didn't shine, either; she probably needed to go to the dentist.

Mrs. Hardy and Gentian's mother had begun to talk about their families. Mr. Hardy was, it appeared, hopeless with plumbing.

"What about your son?" said Gentian's mother.

The woman looked very startled, and then began to laugh weakly. "Him? Oh, no," she said. She seemed to realize that this response was lacking something, and added, looking at Gentian with her nondescript eyes, "I think he's about your age."

"He's tall for twelve," said Gentian's mother.

"I'm wrong, then," said Mrs. Hardy. "He's fourteen."

"He's tall for that, too," said Gentian. "Tell him to watch out for my big sister."

Mrs. Hardy looked dubiously at Rosemary, who was trying not to laugh; and Gentian's mother changed the subject.

§

On a bitter day in December, the boy brought back the snake. Gentian was once more at the kitchen table, making Christmas lists and counting her money and cursing the purchase of Bullfinch's Mythology, which had given her a series of unpleasant dreams and set her back financially.

She opened the door, scowling, and in the blast of sub–zero air that came in she hastily rearranged her expression. His hair was black, and his eyes were blue, and his lips were as red as wine, though that was probably from the cold. He was beautiful. He was taller than Junie, but Junie was out ice–skating with one of the smoking seniors.

He smiled at her. His teeth shone, but were no more pointed than anyone else's. "I'm Dominic Hardy," he said.

"Here's your snake, and my mother sent some cookies."

"Come in; you'll freeze," said Gentian, intelligently, and banged the door behind him so Rosie would hear and come help her out. Rosie was too young and shy to be a problem yet, and perhaps Dominic would think she was funny. "Give me your coat," said Gentian. "I was just going to make some fudge." She had never made it in her life, but she had hung

around plaguing Junie when Junie made it. There were cookies and divinity and fruitcake already, but Juniper had made all those and Gentian would have to say so. “You could wait and take some back with you.” You’ve come such a long way, she thought, and snickered at her own absurdity.

Dominic either had good manners or didn’t want to go home.

“Thank you,” he said, and sat down.

He was not very conversational. He admitted to liking every band Gentian mentioned, and to watching every television show she asked about, and to reading Poe, and even to playing the recorder; but he would not discuss any of these things in detail, and he didn’t ask her any questions. Gentian finally gave up on him and concentrated on the fudge, which was giving her difficulties.

She had burned her tongue for the sixth time, and the fudge still refused to form a ball in the cold water, when Junie came back. She banged the back door behind her, and shot the bolt, which Gentian always forgot to do. The sound made Dominic jump, which was some satisfaction. Juniper pulled off her green beret, shook out all her long red hair, and said, “What are you burning?”

“None of your business,” said Gentian. “Say hello to Dominic.”

Juniper didn’t even blink. “Hello, Dominic,” she said.

“I’m Junie.”

Dominic studied her for for several seconds as if she were a kind of food he had never seen before, and then smiled at her. Gentian saw Junie melt, and made a bet with herself about how long it would be before they went out together. He was better than the smoking seniors, anyway; if Mom ever found out about them she was liable to ground all three girls until they were twenty.

Rosemary came slouching into the kitchen in Juniper’s bathrobe, which she liked because it was too long for her and she could sweep the skirts around the floor, gathering cat hair and playing at being a princess. She stared at Dominic as if he were a food she knew and didn’t like. He smiled at her, too.

Gentian fully expected Rosemary to turn red and run away, which was her usual method of dealing with people who were nice to her. But Rosemary spoke to him. “You’ve got the broken chair,” she said. “You need the cushion.”

And she swept Juniper's bathrobe around and exited without tripping on it, to return bearing the fat gold and black and white Hmong pillow that they had given their mother for her birthday last year. Gentian supposed that it had had to happen sometime. Rosie would probably appreciate somebody who had no conversation; it would save her having to make any. She could get pregnant and be the family statistic.

A horrible smell of burnt sugar and chocolate smote her nose, and as she recoiled from that she felt herself recoiling also at the thoughts she had just had. It was all right to think that way about Juniper; Juniper was acting like an idiot and had been for a year now. But Rosie was all right.

"Get away from that pan!" shouted Juniper.

Gentian got out of her way and yielded up the wooden spoon cheerfully, and went to sit at the table and watch Rosie be worshipful and Dominic see Juniper in a temper.

"I have a project I need help with," said Dominic, impartially to both of them. Gentian stared; he had actually volunteered a piece of information. She wondered if Rosemary's attitude was responsible. She tried to look encouraging, and Dominic explained further. "I want to build a time machine."

Rosemary looked stunned. Gentian said, "What for?"

"Well," said Dominic, "I'll tell you if you'll tell me, what is the maid without a tress?"

"Bald," said Rosemary.

Dominic grinned at her. "No," he said.

"Junie didn't have any hair until she was almost three," said Gentian meanly.

Juniper, beating the fudge, ignored this feeble thrust, but Dominic leaned back against the Hmong cushion and looked carefully at her. "Well, we'd better have Junie, then," he said.

Gentian, feeling conspired against, said, "Well, what do you want to build a time machine for?"

Dominic said, "What was the tower without a crest?"

"Topless," said Rosemary, and then giggled and turned red.

"Ilium had topless towers," said Juniper.

"They didn't finish the Tower of Babel," said Gentian.

Dominic leaned his elbows on the table and stared at her until she felt herself turning redder than Rosemary, and she hadn't even made a dirty

remark. “We’ll have you, too,” said Dominic.

“You still haven’t said why you want to —”

“Where is the road without any dust?”

“The Milky Way,” said Rosemary, who loved riddles.

“We’ll have Rosie, too,” said Dominic.

“Why do you want to?” said Gentian.

“You think about those riddles,” said Dominic, “and you’ll know. Do you have a place here where we could build it?”

“The attic,” said Juniper.

“That’s *mine*,” said Gentian.

“You don’t need all that space.”

“You could decide when we could use it, Genny,” said Dominic. Gentian, who was calculating rather than sentimental in most of her friendships, felt a most peculiar shiver up her spine when he used her name. She was not altogether sure she liked it.

“Well, in that case,” she said.

§

Their father was amused and their mother was wary. But once their father had made it clear to them that a time machine violated the laws of physics and they might as well build a perpetual–motion machine, or try to make the Philospher’s Stone, he raised no objection; and once their mother had made it clear to them that there were always to be at least two girls up there with Dominic, she raised none either. She didn’t like Dominic, once she had met him; she said it was unnatural for a fourteen–year–old boy to be that polite.

“And will trouble come of it?” asked Juniper.

“Not if I can help it,” said their mother.

§

They began after New Year’s, and nothing was as any of them had expected. Dominic was not polite to them, nor charming either; but he got

what he wanted by seeming to be ready to be charming to one of them if she would side with him against the other two. They carried heaps of heavy, awkward objects up three flights of steps; they gave up ice–skating, and birthday parties, and being in the school play, to work on the awful thing; they neglected their homework and their friends; they bruised their fingers with hammering and their egos with trying to please Dominic.

But there was no pleasing Dominic.

They had long ago looked up one another's names in their mother's various herbals, and discovered that Juniper was a diuretic ("Junie pisses people off!"), that Gentian was an emetic ("Genny makes people sick!"), and that Rosemary, although disappointingly to her sisters a sweet and wholesome plant that signified love and remembrance, also dilated the capillaries ("Rosie makes people's blood boil!") As a test case for these attributes, Dominic would have made the authors of the herbals very proud. He got mad at Juniper about three times a day because she wouldn't do any work that might break a fingernail or drip solder on her T–shirt; he said that the faint scent of Gentian's lavender soap disgusted him, and he continued to remark on it from time to time long after she had switched to Ivory; he tolerated Rosie very well for days on end but would suddenly shout at her for five minutes because she had asked him a Bennet Cerf riddle.

And yet he kept coming back. Their mother said he was probably lonely, although it was no more than he deserved; their father said Dominic couldn't resist looking at three beautiful girls and was probably hoping that next time they would keep their mouths shut; Juniper said he came for her chocolate–chip cookies, and Rosemary opined that he came because they had a VCR and would show him tapes of shows his parents wouldn't let him watch. Gentian did not have an opinion, or even a bet with herself. She had a kind of hope in the back of her head, but she did not bring it forward where she could think about it. It sat there like an unlit candle, for when she needed a light of interest in her.

§

“He’s a wimp,” said Juniper, scowling. “He snapped at me for saying __”

“Don’t say it, or somebody else will snap at you,” said her mother.

“Well, honey,” said her father, “they say the devil’s a gentleman, you know.”

His entire family gazed at him in a familiar bafflement.

Gentian had often thought that if she could ever accurately define her father’s “they”, she would be able to have whatever she wanted, all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, with no devil at her back, gentleman or otherwise, to make the gift go sour, either. On the other hand, her father presumably could define his own “they”, and he had, not the kingdoms of the world, but a wife who read Goethe and a completely unruly and ungrateful gaggle of daughters.

§

“The trouble with Dom,” said Rosemary, “is that he wants to have all the fun.”

“Nine tenths of the law of chivalry,” said their father, in a satisfied tone.

His daughters gazed in bafflement; but his wife sat up straight. “You don’t like him any better than I do!”

“Liking has nothing to do with it,” said their father, with the extreme blandness that meant you were trespassing on his private feelings. “Just making observations, that’s all.”

“Are you calling him a gentleman again?” said Gentian.

“Very good,” said her father.

“Gentlemen don’t ask riddles all the time,” said Rosemary.

“Ask him why he asks them; riddle him that,” said their father.

“He says because he can’t remember the answers.”

Their father sat up straight and looked delighted. Their mother said dryly, “Can’t he look them up?”

“He says that’s cheating,” said Juniper.

“Told you he was a gentlemen,” said their father.

“If you mean he abides by a strict set of arbitrary rules of no use to him or anybody else, you’re right,” said their mother.

§

Juniper got fed up first. She had cut her finger on a piece of sheet metal the day before, and although Dominic had been unexpectedly gracious about the blood dripped on his nice clean chassis, Gentian suspected the finger was still hurting her. Also Juniper was used to being in charge, and to having her temper paid attention to, and sometimes feared. Dominic only laughed at her. She quit, officially, in a storm of furious tears, on the first of April.

“There goes the water without any sand,” said Dominic, in a pleased tone.

“You’re a jerk,” said Gentian. “Did you know that?”

“It’s good for Junie to be thwarted,” said Dominic.

“Yes, but not like this.”

“Did you get those connections soldered?”

§

Rosemary quit on the last day of April. In the first place, she had gotten a hunk of hair caught in something sticky of Dominic’s, and had had to have her hair cut a great deal shorter than was becoming to her. And in the second place, her best friend was giving a May Day party and she wanted to go. Dominic was put out, because if she did go he and Gentian would not, according to the edict laid down by their mother, be able to work on the machine that day. “You’re acting just like the maid without a tress,” he said austerely.

“Junie?” said Rosemary, caught off guard.

“A baby,” said Gentian, blandly.

Rosemary, having said, “I’m going, and I don’t care,” about ninety–five times, finally made a dignified exit, merely remarking to Gentian on her way out, “Genny, you’re just as much a jerk as he is.”

Gentian was beginning to suspect that this was true. But Dominic was still beautiful, when he kept his mouth shut; he was the only boy whose

undivided, however impolite, attention she had ever had; and the time machine was enormously convincing. It had a great many very real things in it, bits of computers and circuit boards and four abandoned desk chairs and Volumes II and IV of the Child Ballads.

“Will she tell your mother?” said Dominic.

“Not unless she’s asked.”

“And will you tell her?”

“Not unless I’m asked.”

“And will she ask you?”

“I can probably forestall her,” said Gentian, a little breathlessly. She was not accustomed to disobeying her mother; but whatever Dominic wanted, it wasn’t what her mother was afraid he wanted. He wanted slave labor, in fact, and slavish encouragement, and the supply of cookies and brownies and cakes that Juniper still provided, although she wouldn’t speak to him. And when Gentian had figured out why any of them had been willing to give him these things, then, she bet herself, she would know something.

§

Summer went by — peonies, roses, daylilies, rainy afternoons in the library, sunny mornings in the hammock, swimming, babysitting, writing poetry, reading mystery novels, all unnoticed or forgotten. Gentian crouched in the broiling attic with a Dominic who never sweated, and put things together at his direction. She apologized once for dripping perspiration on one of his keyboards, and he grinned at her and said, “That’s salt without sand, too.” Autumn blazed in like a concourse of peacocks and departed muttering in a swirl of sodden leaves. Gentian took apart three old transistor radios and one that had vacuum tubes in it, and reassembled them for Dominic, who asked her, “When has a forest no leaves?” and received her irritable, “When it’s a forest of evergreens” with amiable satisfaction.

On Hallowe’en night her parents wouldn’t let him in.

Juniper and Rosemary had gone trick–or–treating, and Gentian, alternately enraged and relieved, went to bed early. She dreamed uneasily

of ribbon cable and capacitors and coils of copper and gutted video terminals, and was awakened suddenly by an ungodly thumping and a flash of blue light.

Flinging back the blankets, Gentian stalked through to the other attic room in her red flannel nightgown, forming in her fuddled mind imprecations for the intruders. Junie and Rosie had probably come up here to put their costumes away, and stumbled over the time machine, which was by now the size of three swing sets.

It was Dominic. He smiled at her. “It’s done,” said he.

“How’d you get in here?”

He smiled again, and Gentian felt that shiver up her spine. He said, “You forgot to lock the kitchen door. Junie and Rosie aren’t back yet.”

“My parents will kill me.”

“They won’t know.”

“You think they didn’t hear that godawful noise?”

“That was for you,” said Dominic. “Now come here. Hold this. Thank you. Now plug that cable in and type ‘Go.’ ”

Gentian did as she was told, and an enormous humming filled her senses. “There!” said Dominic, and he closed his warm hands over her cold wrists and kissed her on the mouth.

It was like the time some of Junie’s smoking seniors had put vodka in Gentian’s Seven–Up. She had liked it enormously, but had been quite sure that she shouldn’t.

Dominic seemed to feel the same way; he pulled his mouth away suddenly and sat down hard on the floor. Gentian looked sideways at him, hoping to exchange some sympathetic glance, and saw that he was pale and sweaty, and swallowing hard. It was like the vodka. It didn’t last.

“I do make you sick!” she cried. “Why did you do it, if you didn’t like it?”

Dominic looked at her with great intentness, and suddenly smacked the palm of his hand into his forehead, as if he had just figured out the answer to a physics problem. “Juniper, Gentian, and Rosemary,” he said. “Girls! How could I know it would be girls? Why, what a monstrous trick,” said Dominic. “What could be worse than girls?”

“You!” shrieked Gentian. “You’re worse than any girl I’ve ever known! You’re *worse* than a vampire!”

Dominic stood up, which alarmed her; and then he smiled, which hurt her, because a smile, from anybody, was not going to be enough, any more. “That’s not my name,” he said, “but we’ll call it a fair answer. Good–bye.” And he went over to the window, opened it, snapped the screen out, and stepped off the sill. Gentian lurched to her feet and flung herself across the room and stuck her head out the window. Right below her was the door she had forgotten to lock, with the light over it burning for Junie and Rosie. It shone brightly on an empty patch of sidewalk. She had heard nothing hit the ground.

She turned around and looked at the time machine. Very likely it was against the laws of physics. What Dominic had just done was against the laws of physics. But she remembered Junie’s blood, and Rosie’s hair, and her own sweat, and how very welcome they had been to Dominic. She looked at the ordinary ivory–colored light switch that he had set into a little metal box, to be the On switch for his time machine. Would it work? Would it take them to the fifteenth century, or the twenty–fifth? What good would that do him? What had he wanted it for? Because babies had no hair, and the Tower of Babel was never finished? Because there was no sand in tears and no leaves in an evergreen forest? Because she did not give his name but answered his question with himself? Who was he?

She didn’t know. But she turned off the time machine’s switch. She unplugged its eight plugs, and took from the wall sockets the adapters that had made it possible to plug in so many. She pulled out all the computer cables and all the ribbon cables. Then she began ripping out wires by the handful, and finally she picked up the four keyboards one after the other and used them to smash the rest of it. Then she dried her face on her sleeve and stomped downstairs. Her father was reading in the kitchen, and did not, of course, look up.

“Why did you name us what you named us?” said Gentian, in a trembling voice.

“I thought you’d read those herbals,” said her father, turning a page. “Juniper, gentian, and rosemary ward off witches, and evil spirits, and so on. Ghosties and ghoulies and long–legged beasties.”

“And vampires?”

“Very probably.”

“Dominic’s not a vampire.”

“Close enough,” said her father. “He’s sucked you girls dry enough, one way or another.”

“Junie and Rose make him angry and I make him sick.”

“That’s what we hoped.”

“But why,” said Gentian, “did he want a time machine?”

Her father closed the book and looked at her. “Why does anybody want one? To do something over.”

Gentian thought of the things she would do over. She said, “But something good or bad?”

“You think about all those riddles he asked you, and you’ll know,” said her father. “And when you think you do, you can come and tell me. Because if I’d been sure that boy was up to nothing good, I wouldn’t have let him set up an alchemist’s laboratory in my attic.”

“What about the riddles?” said Gentian. “They weren’t very good ones. And sometimes he acted like every question was a riddle, and no matter what kind of answer you gave him, he thought you were answering the riddle. He asked me what could be worse than girls, and I told him he could, and he said that was a fair answer.”

Her father was looking delighted again. “The devil is worse nor woman was,” he said. “So he remembered his riddles at the end.”

“He kissed me,” said Gentian, who was not accustomed to confiding in her father and was rather surprised to find herself doing so.

“I’m not surprised,” said her father.

“And he didn’t like it.”

“That’s a compliment, sweetheart.”

“I don’t want,” said Gentian, sticking to the one thing she was sure of, “to go through life making people sick.”

“You won’t make everybody sick. Just amnesiac gentlemen with improbable ambitions.”

“But what if I like amnesiac gentlemen with improbable ambitions?” It was just like parents, to give you a name that protected you from what you liked.

“Learn all the riddles you can, until your taste matures,” said her father, dryly. “What have you done with his time machine?”

“Smashed it.”

“It’s probably just as well,” said her father, but he looked wistful.

“If he hadn’t kissed me,” said Gentian.

“If kissing you could make him sick,” said her father, “then I wouldn’t care to trust him with a time machine.”

Gentian, having heard as much as she cared to assimilate, wandered into the dining room and peered out the bay window.

There was a blank darkness where the Hardy house should be, and beyond it the straight line of the next house’s hedge stood up against the starry sky. She tried to remember what the Hardy house had looked like, and couldn’t. She wondered — assuming the house had ever really been there at all — what Mrs. Hardy had needed that snake for.

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She enjoys hiking, gardening, cooking, reading, being a part of local science–fiction fandom, and attending the theater. She understands that writers are supposed to have colorful careers, but on the whole she prefers as quiet a life as the family and the cats will permit.

After Our Bodies Fail

Abra Staffin–Wiebe

Humans are ridiculous and wonderful. We are incandescent spirits walking around inside clumsy, fragile meat–puppets, and we are such clever creatures that we routinely exceed the survivability limits of our bodies. Every day, many of us hurl ourselves into the world at speeds exceeding 60 mph, wear lightweight clothing despite temperatures that could cause hypothermia and death, and stand beside our food while we bombard it with electromagnetic radiation that can cook flesh from the inside out. We think nothing of it.

When our bodies fail to work the way we want them to, we apply the same ferocious ingenuity to surpassing physical limitations imposed upon us. As a species, we keep pushing forward and we don't give up, no matter how many absurd (or horrifying) dead–ends we run into.

In 1917, a desperate Kansas farmer named Stittsworth came to the young Dr. John Brinkley. Today, his complaint could be fixed by the company that brings us television ads of a man and a woman watching the sunset while reclining in separate bathtubs. Back then, all the doctor could offer was a joke about needing the glands from a randy goat. The farmer took him seriously and demanded a transplant, the doctor obliged, and an empire was born. When the farmer spread the word that he'd been cured by having bits of goat gonads implanted in his testicles, other desperate men lined up for the operation. Soon, Dr. Brinkley claimed the procedure could also cure the flu, acne, high blood pressure, and even insanity. He performed over 16,000 goat testicle transplants — a world record that we can all hope will never be beaten.

You've probably heard similar stories about the horrific practices that humans throughout time have undergone in hopes of a cure. In the Middle Ages, barber–surgeons performed bloodletting to flush out the bad humors that caused illness. The red stripe on modern barber poles stands for blood, the white stripe for bandages, and the caps on either end for the leech bowl and the blood collection bowl. During the Victorian heyday of leeching, leeches were even applied internally — yes, exactly where you were just thinking of.

In the 1700s, people consumed a syrup of garden snails to soothe sore throats and coughs. That may have actually worked, but it's pretty unlikely

that sliding de–shelled snails into your ear helps with earache.

In the early 1900s, the “Rattlesnake King” grew popular by killing rattlesnakes to advertise his snake–oil–derived medicine. Since he made it mostly of mineral oil, with a little beef fat, red pepper, and turpentine thrown in, it didn’t cure anything — but it did at least gain immortality in the phrase, “snake oil.”

Before the introduction of penicillin in the 1940s, doctors used mercury to treat diseases, primarily syphilis. This despite the notorious madness of hatters, which was by that time well known to be caused by mercury exposure.

Humanity’s history is littered with travesties and adorned by equally stunning triumphs. Our medical history is cut from the same cloth. In addition to the great leaps forward in medical science that we’ve all heard about, it is elevated by individual victories.

During the Dark Ages, most prosthetic limbs were barely a cut above hook hands and peg legs. When knights lost limbs, their armorers constructed sheaths mostly to conceal the deficit from their enemies. A leg would sit in a stirrup. A hand might hold a banner, but nothing more.

Then came the Renaissance, a time of great advancement in medical science, as in so many other fields. In the early 1500s, Götz von Berlichingen lost his right arm during a siege in Bavaria. The iron hand constructed for him was a mechanical masterpiece with spring action, articulated fingers, and a series of releases to enable position changes. He could hold a quill, play cards, direct his horse, and grip a lance. It allowed him to continue his military career. Thanks to this futuristic–for–its–time technology, he lived to a ripe old age and left behind a legacy of three daughters, seven sons, and the assertion, “er kann mich im Arsche lecken,” which has come into modern English as, “He can kiss my ass.” That doesn’t sound like a man slowed down by his injury.

Portrait of Götz von Berlichingen,
copper engraving, City Museum of Cologne.

Thanks to human inventiveness and our ability to adapt and overcome, every age is an age of miracles and wonders. In modern times, we no longer need an armorer, or even a doctor, to make a prosthetic hand. The Robohand can be made by anyone with access to a 3–D printer. An American puppeteer and a South African carpenter with a mangled hand collaborated to design the printable prosthesis' blueprint. First they created a hand for the carpenter. Then they made one for a five–year–old with missing fingers. They made the blueprint available for free online. The South African carpenter kept fitting children with new hands — over a hundred, at last count. Meanwhile, a Massachusetts father found the blueprint and used a school's 3–D printer to make a new hand for his son. A Kansas teenager went to a public library and printed a hand for a family friend, a nine–year–old boy born missing the four fingers of his right hand. The latest design of the Robohand snaps together like Legos, and it can be made for a materials cost of about $5.

3–D printers are restoring more than just hands, too. Using living cells as the printing medium, surgeons can produce transplantable kidneys.

Other organs are coming soon. German doctors printed a jaw–bone model and used it to build a titanium–and–bone mandible that they implanted in the patient's shoulder muscle for seven weeks, until it was ready to be moved to his jaw.

Our understanding of how brain and body work is still growing and changing. Only a few months ago, for example, surgeons from University Hospitals Leuven in Belgium announced that they had discovered a new knee ligament. This explains why some knees still buckled even after having surgery that should have repaired all the torn ligaments.

We live in a world of medical advances that science fiction writers of previous generations barely dreamed of. Open–source programming has leapfrogged from word processing and game applications to robotic surgery systems. A cybernetic hand gives amputees a sense of touch by transmitting electrical impulses to electrodes surgically implanted on nerves in the upper arm. Brain implants control epileptic seizures. Stressing techniques convert mature cells into pluripotent stem cells, which can then transform into almost any kind of cell in the body. In the last two years, we've gone from the first quadriplegic to control a fully mobile robot arm with her mind (and use it to feed herself chocolate) to a paralyzed teenager who will use a lower–body exoskeleton to stand, walk, and kick the opening ball at the World Cup 2014 in Brazil.

When we are struck down by injury or disease, today we can usually be healed or use adaptive devices to overcome maladies that, only a few centuries ago, would have been death sentences. When one treatment doesn't work, there is always another medical trial waiting in the wings.

Yet even as we hover on the edge of technological transcendence, our humanity is what gets us through the day. After the inventors and the engineers and the roboticists and the surgeons do their work, they leave. Then comes the challenge of rebuilding a life. In many cases, it won't be quite the same life as it was before.

The difference may be small. We may lose a few degrees in our range of motion. We may have to avoid certain movements because they grate against painful scar tissue. We might not be able to reach the highest cabinet or lift the heavy bag of cat litter. We might have to give up running or skiing or cartwheels or driving a car. We may need to wear wrist braces or knee braces or carry a cane sometimes, just in case.

The difference may be large enough to swallow the world as we know it. We may need special accommodations just to be able to use the toilet. We may suffer from pain that recedes sometimes, but never leaves entirely. Simple daily routines that used to take ten minutes might now take a full hour and leave us exhausted for the rest of the day. We might begin to see life as an obstacle course that forces us to constantly run time–and–pain vs. benefit calculations. We may endure humiliations thoughtlessly inflicted on us by other people who don't understand or never considered or simply don't care.

Perhaps the difference is mental instead of physical, a new awareness of dangers and pain–in–waiting that affects what activities we are willing to do and how we move through our lives. Maybe we're aware of the changes in how we feel. Maybe they're a confused tangle that rises up to trip us when we least expect it.

A different set of experts comes in when we seek help in rebuilding. Depending on the circumstances, psychiatrists and physical therapists may both be useful. Treatment advances have been made here, too. Anti–gravity treadmills reduce the stress on joints. Remote–controlled aluminum and titanium exoskeletons teach patients how to walk again. Virtual reality desensitizes war veterans to PTSD triggers. If that fails, treating post–traumatic stress disorder with MDMA (street name: Ecstasy) may also lead to long–term improvement.

For most people who are recovering from an injury, sessions with a physical therapist are finite in number. Physical therapists work toward concrete goals: writing your name, walking a mile, being able to tie your own shoes, or rolling over in bed without pain. To get the most out of physical therapy, figure out what your specific, small–scale goals are — and tell them.

Eventually, a point is reached where further improvements become a matter of incremental change over long periods of time. It seems like the end of the road. But years after we've adjusted to our new limits, we may discover that they've shifted, just a little bit.

While we struggle to restore our bodies' functionality, we also begin to pick up the pieces of our lives that were broken by our sudden inability. Sometimes physical ordeals are predictable, like planned surgeries or childbirth. If you're lucky, you were able to plan for it ahead of time. It can be very useful to figure out what will be needed to restart different

areas of your life. Then make a plan for how and in what order you're going to do so. Even if you didn't have the opportunity to plan beforehand, you might try taking some time at the beginning of the recovery process to think about how you want to construct your new life.

Photo by Salina Canizales

Spoon Theory is a great way to explain living with physical conditions that affect your day–to–day existence. Imagine that you are given a handful of spoons at the beginning of the day. Everything you do (or, in some cases, don't do) costs a spoon, from washing your hair to standing on a train to not getting enough sleep or skipping lunch. Your spoons run out quickly, and you're forced to make difficult choices about what activities are most important to you on any given day. Christine Miserandino designed Spoon Theory to help explain living with an invisible disability, but it's also a practical tool for adjusting to new limitations. If you're recovering from a physical injury, the number of spoons you get will slowly increase over time. If you're trying to rebuild your life while

managing a chronic condition, your number of spoons may remain steady, or it may wax and wane depending on what phase you're in.

So how do you decide where to spend your spoons?

Everybody's first step to reconstructing their life is different, but one possibility is to start your daily routine by looking at your calendar, your list of deadlines, and your "would usually do" items. Keep track of important dates so that they don't sneak up on you. Prepare for these in advance as much as you can, even if that only means laying out your clothes and setting the table for breakfast the night *before* you have a morning appointment. As they come up, create a list of things that you would usually do at that time, can't right now, but want to eventually. If there are complicated tasks that you do regularly, try writing out step–by–step instructions. It may be quite some time before you can get back to them, or you may have to do them while under the influence of painkillers or other drugs that affect your memory and ability to concentrate.

Humanity has thrived because we are adaptable. We have expanded into so many ecological niches that we should be classified as an invasive species. Through the centuries, whether our medical treatments succeed or fail, we persevere. As long as we are this side of the grave, we are able to go beyond simple survival to make a life for ourselves. In many cases, the life we rebuild will not be the same as it was before, but it will be a life, and it will be ours.

Abra Staffin–Wiebe spent several years living abroad in India and Africa before marrying a mad scientist and settling down to live and write in Minneapolis. She specializes in dark science fiction, cheerful horror, and modern fairy tales. However, she rarely gets a chance to write about goat testicles. She also maintains Aswiebe's Market List, a resource for science fiction, fantasy, and horror writers. Discover more of her fiction at her website, http://www.aswiebe.com, or find her on the social media site of your choice.

The Violent Century

Lavie Tidhar

FIVE: SHADOWS IN THE SNOW

MINSK
1941

38. Minsk. Belarus. 1941.

The city falls. It becomes obvious to them in the early morning, a sudden, eerie silence which only lasts a moment. But long enough. They creep out of the mansion they had occupied. Fog covers them. German tanks are already evident on the streets. This is the start of Operation Barbarossa, we know: the German invasion of the USSR. But the speed at which the Wermacht enters Minsk is astonishing. The city falls sooner than Fogg and Oblivion had expected, and now they have to somehow make their way out.

Not that that's a problem. Not for Fogg and Oblivion, or is it Oblivion and Fogg? There's chaos in the street. Gunfire erupts nearby and a man stumbles into their fog, blood streaming out of his chest. He collapses at their feet, looks up at them, for a moment, before his eyes become glass and are still.

Oblivion steps over him, says, We need to get to a vantage point.

— You have any suggestions?

They pass a burning synagogue. Stained–glass windows showing a Star of David are still, somehow, whole. They should have sent fliers, Oblivion complains. Instead of us. I can't see anything in this fog.

— Neither can the Germans, Fogg points out. Or the Reds.

— Bolshevism has its moments, Oblivion says, without irony. And: Come on.

A German tank caterpillars by, too close. Oblivion reaches out, flexes his fingers. Does not quite touch it, just extends fingers like weaving a spider's web. The tank groans. The sound of metal twisting. Bending. Breaking. What the hell are you doing, Fogg says. We can't draw attention to ourselves.

— Who's drawing attention, Oblivion says, *twisting*, screams from inside the tank, the turret twists impossibly, Oblivion reaches and touches the metal, it falls away at his touch, opening a hole into the tank which grows, German soldiers inside like sardines in a tin, gaping at them, Well, do your thing, Oblivion says, irritably — quoting Emerson. Fogg forms a fist of grey fog. It reaches into the tank. Tactile fog, stroking, touching, feeling. The grey hand quests. Oblivion turns his hand, over and over, nothingness grows over the tank, one of the soldiers stares in

bewilderment at a suddenly missing arm. Somehow, it's just not there any more.

— Why are we doing this again? Fogg says.

— To observe, Oblivion says. The Old Man said to observe.

Fogg follows his logic. They are not here to watch the Wermacht take over Minsk. No one in England gives a blast about Minsk. No one even knows where it is.

What they *do* care about, care about deeply, is Nazi and/or Soviet deployment of Bureau–equivalent personnel.

Übermenschen, to use another word.

— Your brief is simple, the Old Man had said. Observing them in his office, Fogg and Oblivion standing to attention. The Bureau had changed in the past couple of years. Expanded quarters. New personnel. Everyone in uniform. Or almost everyone. Not the Old Man. Who said, the Nazis are planning to invade Russia. Corrected himself. The USSR.

Nazis already control Poland. France. Treaty with Italy. Nazi expansion like ripples in a pond. Concentric circles expanding outwards. The Old Man: Your brief is simple. To observe.

— And if we can't?

— Then make them come to you.

Oblivion and Fogg make them come to them. Minsk at sunrise and the sun through the smoke like a prism. The tank groans. The soldiers cry out inside. Fogg makes the man appear, then. The Fog Man. Shapes him out of water droplets and ice crystals. Shapes him out of the smoke from burning cars and homes and people. Shapes him out of the nightmare that is Minsk.

Makes him tall. Makes him like Oblivion. Makes him tower over buildings, stand out like a beacon, makes him reach out grasping grey fingers over the smoke and the haze. Oblivion twists, the tank groans, a burst of radio communication, Fogg says, It's time to find that vantage point while we still can.

They shift. They move through haze and fog, running, and find shelter behind an intact Daimler. Watching. The Fog Man dissipates slowly in the breeze, returns to its constituent parts, smoke and water. The tank… Oblivion turns his hand, one last time, a frown of effort on that ivory face, glistening sweat, the more power you use the more it takes it out of you. Oblivion twists… *erases* the tank. Fogg can only stare. Does not understand Oblivion any better now than before. More tanks roll down the

street. A sniper fires from a rooftop. Fogg sees a child, a boy, running down the street, towards the tanks. A woman runs after him, screaming. Fogg doesn't understand the words but understands their meaning. Come back!

Gunshots.

Smoke.

The boy rolls like a football. The woman flies after him, like a wounded bird, but she is not flying, she is falling, the tanks roll on and over them both, the sound they make is swallowed by the fog.

— Hold it together, damn it! Oblivion says. Fogg raises his head from the ground, wipes his lips.

— Watch.

A jeep arrives and a man climbs down from it. He is a short, wiry man, with close–cropped silver hair, a tanned face, as if he had spent time a long way from here, in one of the Mediterranean countries. He sniffs the air.

— What the…? Fogg says.

— Shut up, Oblivion says. Tense, beside him. The man in the street stiffens. Turns his head, this way and that. Sniffs. Turns, slowly, in their direction. Fogg reaches his hand out. Finds Oblivion's. Cold. Presses it, hard, between thumb and forefinger. Oblivion shakes his head. Minutely. They crouch, frozen. The man reminds Fogg of a wolf. The silver hair, the way he stands. Like he could be galvanised into motion without you even noticing. The way he smells the air. The way he seems to sense them. The man smiles. Slowly. Revealing teeth. His tongue snakes out. He licks his lips.

Fogg panics.

Later, he couldn't explain it. Irrational fear. Came from nowhere. Came on him like a physical blow, from outside. Seared him. Panicking, he runs. Behind him the wolf man grins, follows.

— Fogg! Fogg, you —

Oblivion grunting. Fogg turns, sees Oblivion and the wolf man facing each other, frozen, the wolf man's face in a fixed grin, Oblivion's hand raised before him, his face colder and harder than Fogg had ever seen them before.

— Kill him, Oblivion!

The fear is gone as quickly as it has come.

— I… can’t. Oblivion’s voice strained. Breathing harder now. The wolf man presses forward, one step. Oblivion takes a step back.

The scene seems frozen. Motes of ash suspended in mid–air. Flames on the horizon, not moving, smudges of red against grey. Then the horror comes back, worse than before, overwhelming Fogg, making him drop to his knees. His heartbeat escalates, it feels as though his heart is trying to escape his chest. His bare hands on the ice. He whimpers, like a wounded dog. The wolf man grins wider, presses forward again. Oblivion, sweat on that ivory skin, takes a second step back. Fogg thinks of Roberts, at school. The bullies. Fogg rises. Fury burns the fear. What makes a man. What makes a hero. Cries out as he runs, runs at the German, catching both him and Oblivion by surprise. Smashes into the wolf man, who grunts, in pain or surprise, and goes down on his behind. The fear is lifted as completely as it has come. The man on the ice growls, his face animalistic, strangely beautiful. Oblivion says, Run!

They run.

They run through the city of Minsk, the fog wrapped around them, gathering, as if Fogg by will alone could fill up the entire city with it, could hide this obscene invasion from view, the bodies in the street, the burning homes, the advancing tanks. They run and the fear reaches after them but it is weaker now, growing fainter in the distance. At last they reach the outskirts of town. Panting. Hot now. Sweating inside their winter clothes. I hate the goddamned cold, Fogg says. Still not used to swearing. Makes Oblivion smile. We need to get out of here, he says.

— Seen enough, then?

Oblivion drops the smile. Looks grim. I think we’ve seen enough, yes, he says. Quietly.

But they are not yet out of the city.

39. The Bureau. 1941.

— You did well, the Old Man says.

Fogg with a dirty grey beard, Oblivion somehow never needing a shave but his eyes look haggard, his face withdrawn. Their clothes stink. They stink.

Through Belarus to the Baltic Sea and a waiting fishing boat with signals flashing, through a nighttime journey to Uppsala county in Sweden and there a makeshift runway and a plane —

Hurried over to the Bureau from the military airfield, then made to wait as the Old Man was busy in the War Rooms. Were given tea. Fogg holds it now, his fingers wrapped around the mug. Shivering despite the warmth of this underground lair.

— Tell me about this wolf man, the Old Man says.

Makes notes in a folder. Pen with blue ink. Looks up. A spotter? he says.

Like himself.

— Yes, Oblivion says.

— But more than that?

— Yes, Oblivion says. Laconically.

— Do, please, elaborate, the Old Man says.

— A negator, Oblivion says. The Old Man raises eyebrows. Oh?

— Somehow he was able to stop my own… Oblivion hesitates.

— Your forces of disentanglement? the Old Man suggests. Oblivion shrugs. The Old Man licks a finger, turns a page.

— SS? he asks.

Fogg frowns. No, he says. The man did not wear uniform. Black leather, no insignia. A gun in a holster but he hadn't used it. Wore it casually, like decoration.

— Gestapo, the Old Man says, flatly.

Across the ice, they saw things they were not meant to see and survive.

The Old Man pushes the folder at them. A face looks out. Their wolf man. Fogg shudders again. The cold.

— Brigadeführer Hans von Wolkenstein, the Old Man says. A dreamy look in his eyes. The grey–haired man stares at them from the photograph. Honorary SS rank, the Old Man says. Attached to the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police. Department F.

— Department F? Fogg says.

The Gestapo has five departments. A for Enemies, B for Sects and Churches (primary amongst them department B4, dealing exclusively with the Jews), C for Administration and Party Affairs, D for the Occupied Territories (under which Brigadeführer Hans von Wolkenstein would otherwise be assumed to be working, per his appearance in Belarus), and finally E, the department of Counter Intelligence.

— Department F, the Old Man says.

— Übermenschen, Oblivion says.

— Aye, the Old Man says, some poor imitation of a regional accent. Nazi equivalent of our own dear Bureau for Superannuated Affairs.

— I thought the Nazis show off their Übermenschen, Fogg says.

The Old Man smiles. They show off *some* of them, certainly, he agrees. The presentable ones, at least. The most suitably *Aryan*. For propaganda purposes they have a high value indeed.

— You really don't understand, do you, Oblivion says. Fogg says, What. The Old Man watches, that same tolerant smile on his face.

— The Gestapo is not the SS, Oblivion says. Fogg knows the SS have their own special Übermenschen unit. Their uniform are white, the twin lightning bolts of the SS on their chests within a giant umlauted U. The SS — Schutzstaffel, or Defence Corps — are a military entity. The Gestapo is police…

— They're the ones in charge of hunting Übermenschen, Fogg says, whispers, realisation sinking in. The Old Man's smile is grim. He nods.

— Brigadeführer Hans von Wolkenstein, he says. Austrian. Early supporter of the National–Socialist Party. A favourite of Adolf Hitler, advanced rapidly through the ranks of the Party before disappearing from view about a year ago. We can get very little information on Department F. We didn't even know von Wolkenstein was a spotter, until this moment, though we surmised as much…

— What was he doing in Minsk? Fogg says. Oblivion looks at him sideways.

— One of the Nazis' concerns is that little is known of the effects of the change in the Soviet Union, the Old Man says.

— He was hunting, Oblivion says. For people like us.

— And did he find them? the Old Man asks.

Fogg and Oblivion look at each other.

40. Belarus. 1941.

Across the ice. The city sprawls in all directions, advancing Germans on one side, the retreating Red Army on the other, Fogg and Oblivion in the middle. Dogs howl at the sky. Fogg raises ice particles like a screen to shield them. Word is out. Sirens in the distance. The bark of guns. The sound of wheels. They skulk from house to house, doorway to doorway. Nazi soldiers everywhere. See Belarusians rounded up on the street, sometimes led away, sometimes, more simply, shot. Burned bodies everywhere. A man with his face peeled off. Fogg raises the Fog Man again. It stalks ahead or behind. It scares people away. The Fog Man is grey to black, it is as tall as houses, it can reach into a tank, Fogg imbues it with enough force to be physical, it can slap, it can stomp, it can hurt people. He had never done this before. Had never extended the fog–sense this far, this deep. Oblivion, beside him, doesn't speak. Sometimes removes obstacles in their way. Obliviates them. People, buildings, tanks. Oblivion is like a miniature Wermacht invasion all on his own.

Running, they draw all sorts of attention to themselves. Eldrich energies coursing through the air. Vomacht waves. The change. The world is a white expanse of ice slashed with red. The red of fire, the red of blood. Rising ahead of them, a monster forms itself out of the ice. The ground itself pushing up, rising, forming a grotesque ice golem, a malevolent thick–armed thing. Fogg and Oblivion skirt around it, slipping on the ice, Fogg's Fog Man losing substantiality behind them. The sound of engines and the jeep reappears, a driver with the wolf man in the passenger seat. A tank pierces through the smoke, a Panzer II, turret protruding forward like an obscene appendage. It fires, once, a burst of smoke and noise and a hole is punched through the ice golem's chest, and the sky shows clear through the wound.

Oblivion swears, quietly. They lie on their stomachs on the ice, watching. The wolf man climbs out of the jeep. Smiles. The ice golem advances on him, towering over the Nazi, but each step becomes more hesitant, uncertain, and the golem begins to lose definition, to melt in tiny rivulets, as if it's sweating, until it stops, a mere step from the wolf man, and freezes there, an uncertain expression on its snowman face.

— What? Fogg whispers.

— Shut up, Oblivion whispers back.

— Get him, the wolf man says. Soldiers pour out of a truck behind them, hidden in the fog. Grey uniform, Gestapo getup, they stream across the ice, around the immobile golem. A man pops out of the ground, dressed in white camouflage, he raises his hands, snow erupts from the ground like fists, it punches the soldiers. The man moves his arms like a conductor, playing the snow. The wolf man bares his teeth, reaches out his hand, palm open, concentrating, the man in the white camouflage reels back, the snow falls, the soldiers recover themselves, make for him.

— We can’t let them take him! Fogg says.

— We’re only here to observe! Oblivion says.

— To observe something is to change it, Fogg says. He concentrates; like the Nazi. He makes the Fog Man come back. Like a giant doll. Clumsy, on the ice. Says, Come on, Oblivion. Through tight lips. The fog condenses. Ice in the air giving it weight, presence. Shouts behind. The wolf man turns but too slowly. The Fog Man, this fog golem if you think about it that way, swipes a long grey hand made of icy crystals. Aims it at the wolf man’s head.

It connects with a crunch. Drops the wolf man to his knees. Suddenly the man in white is free again. His ice concerto rises, white arms shooting out of the frozen ground in a mockery of a Hitler salute. Grab the Gestapo men. Drag them down, into the ground. The sound of screams, of crunching bones. Fogg feels ill. Arcs of bright blood on the snow, arcs of red staining the purity of white.

41. The Farm. 1936.

— How far can you extend your range?

Fogg concentrates. Dr Turing makes notes on a clipboard. They are in the large field beside the main house. It is a sunny day. Few clouds. Fogg concentrates hard. Raises a light fog in the air. It hovers. Thickens.

— Would it be fair to say it is dependent on local meteorological conditions? Dr Turing says.

— How the hell should I know? Fogg says. Dr Turing ignores him. Try extending it in a straight line, he suggests.

Fogg concentrates. The fog forms into an arrow, coalesces. Drifts from where they stand. Thirty feet is easy. At fifty there is a slight hesitation. At seventy feet the fog loses definition. Fogg feels sweat on his skin. The sun shines down. Dr Turing makes annotations on the paper. Good, good, he says.

Fogg lets his arms drop. How? He says. How does it happen?

— Quantum entanglement, Dr Turing says. Think of the mind as a… hesitates. As a machine, he says. A *computer*. Do you know what a computer is?

— A calculating machine?

— Of course. Quite right. A shy smile on Dr Turing's face. Think of the brain as a calculating device existing in several probabilities at once.

— I don't think I know what you mean, Fogg says, dubiously, but Turing keeps on, regardless — Fogg has the sense of a young, lonely man, used to carrying out conversations in his own head.

— The brain can be viewed as a biological quantum computer, Turing says. As such it interacts with the world on a subatomic level as well as the observable world. That means that your brain tells your hands and feet what to do — the body you feel yourself inhabiting — but it also works on a smaller scale, as well — a scale well beyond our abilty to observe. Formerly beyond our ability to control. The world that is ruled by probabilities.

— I really don't —

— The Vomacht wave was a probability wave, Turing said.

— Well, whatever you say, Fogg says. Feels nervous. On edge. The fog thickens around him. Turing smiles, makes a note on the clipboard. Interesting, yes, he says.

42. The Bureau. 1941.

— The *Gibor* organisation, the Old Man says.

— The what?

They are still briefing the Old Man. He paces the room. Irritable, somehow. Says, A Jewish defence organisation. Gibor, meaning ‘hero’ in their Hebrew. Some, it appears, operate as partisans, supported by the NKVD — the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs. What did you say his name was?

— Anton, Oblivion says. But he called himself Kerach.

43. Belarus. 1941.

The man in white looks in their direction. Fogg can see his face for the first time. It is an extraordinarily ugly face. The man has no hair, not even eyebrows. His face is pockmarked and scarred, like a lunar landscape after millions of years of meteor impacts. His eyes are a pale blue, so pale they're almost white. He flashes them a sudden, unexpected grin. It transforms his face, lighting it up. Blood and guts on the ice, the wolf man rises to all fours, his face lean and hungry, red eyes look at them, moving from the man in white to Oblivion and Fogg.

Oblivion says: Run. There seems nothing else to say.

They run.

It is difficult running on ice. The fog follows them, hiding them from view. The sound of feet slapping the ground at their side. Fogg turns his head, sees the man in white keeping pace with them, that extraordinary grin still on his face. Happy to see them. Like they'd been friends forever. Just happened to run into each other here, in Belarus, during a Nazi invasion.

They find shelter away from the city, behind a fallen Soviet tank half buried in the ice. Lean their backs against it. Breathing hard. The man in white takes out a small packet, extracts a long strip of something grey or brown. Offers it to Fogg.

— What the hell is that?

— It's some sort of beef jerky, Oblivion says. I think. Accepts it from the man in white. Chews. It's not bad, he says.

They sit there with their backs to the metal, enclosed in fog, chewing.

— American? the man in white says. He has a deep, guttural voice.

— British, Oblivion says.

— Americans aren't even *in* this war! Fogg says. Somehow disliking this man, with his powers of snow and ice. Oblivion elbows him, hard. I'm Oblivion, he says. Speaks clearly, slowly. This is Fogg. You?

— Anton, the man says. Grins that crazy grin. Big guy, Fogg realises. Large square teeth with small gaps between them. My name Anton! Slaps Fogg on the shoulder. But you call me… hesitates, as if coming to a decision then, at last, says, Kerach.

That guttural sound, that *ch* stuck in the throat. Kerrrrrach, the man, Anton, says. Points at the ice. Makes it shake — makes Fogg jump. Jesus,

he says.

— Kerach — ice? Oblivion says.

— Da! *Ice*, Anton says. Pulls up the sleeve of his coat. Shows them his naked arm. A tattoo there. A raised fist, embedded within a blue Star of David. Fogg says, Jesus, again. Anton nods enthusiastically. Jesus, he says.

— We need to get out of here, Oblivion says. Fogg wholeheartedly agrees. Anton, as if understanding their meaning, if not their words, nods. Points at the two of them. Then points to the distance. Points at himself. Points back where they came from. Kill Nazis, he says, complacently.

Oblivion nods. Stands up. Fogg and Anton follow. Oblivion reaches to shake the Jewish Übermensch's hand.

— You're crazy going back there, Fogg says. Anton grins again, and Fogg thinks it is almost like a grimace of pain. Kill Nazis, Anton says.

— Yes, well, Fogg says. Plenty of them about.

He and Oblivion make their way across the ice. Anton stands, watching them go, but he is soon swallowed up by the fog.

44. The Bureau. 1941.

— That tattoo is a special sort of encouragement dreamed up by the NKVD, I would think, the Old Man says.

— How so? Fogg says.

— Gives them an extra incentive not to get caught.

Fogg thinks of being a Jew and being caught by the Nazis. No, not Nazis. The wolf man. Wonders what happened to Anton. Thinks, he would have opened up a hole in the ice and jumped inside rather than be taken alive.

Didn't like the way Anton and Oblivion had looked at each other. And didn't like what the man could do to the ice.

The rest of their escape was red and white and grey.

They fled across the frozen terrain. Slowly. Tortuously. But no more Übermenschen. Fog surrounded them. Fogg's every moment a pained focus, a quantum entanglement with ice and water particles, with smoke, with dust. Oblivion cleared the way when they came on hostile forces. Anything alive was hostile. Mostly they passed by undetected. They were just two shapeless figures in the mist. But once they hit a group of infantry, soldiers in a semi–circle, a group of Belarusian civilians digging a hole. The soldiers fired before the hole was dug deep. The bodies piled up soundlessly, it felt to Fogg at the time. Soundlessly. They should have walked away, just skirted the hole, the pile of corpses. Instead they didn't even use what they had, only their knives, all discipline forgotten, days on the Farm, the drills, the Old Man's orders: gone.

They had come at the soldiers with knives, like berserkers. War robbed you of heroics as much as of humanity. Serrated edges. Remembers burying it in the commanding officer's gut, and drawing it out, entrails spilling on the ice, steaming, the fog rising into the air like a dagger. Remembers running the edge across a man's neck and feeling the geyser of blood, warm on his hands and face. When the soldiers at last brought up their weapons, they had suddenly realised what they'd done. Breathing heavily, almost as in sexual congress, Fogg shaped the air around them into a weapon. Oblivion punched holes of unbeing through men whose flesh melted.

The rest of their escape was uneventful.

— We nullify each other, the Old Man says. Has already dismissed them. Speaking to himself. Oblivion says, Sir?

— Had there been Übermenschen on just one side, the Old Man says. If only the Nazis had them, for instance. Then the war could go a different way. But having them on every side nullifies the advantage. I'm afraid, gentlemen, that in this war, we are merely common soldiers.

Seems to lose interest. As if their mission, after all, had not concluded favourably. Dismisses them with a wave of his hand. Good work, he says, as they leave. But half–heartedly. Outside, Fogg lights up a cigarette. Oblivion too. It's war. Everyone smokes. Leave the Bureau, walk down Pall Mall, heading to the river. Cold on the embankment. Stare into the water. Green–grey and murky.

— What would you do… hesitates. What would you have done, in life I mean, if the Old Man hadn't found you?

Oblivion looks surprised at the question. Doesn't answer. So little Fogg that knows about him, so little we have been able to dig up. Where had he come from. You? Oblivion says. Fogg shrugs, the question bouncing on him, shapes in the fog from the lamps of river traffic, trapped ghosts projected on a screen. Maybe a carpenter, he says. Doesn't know why he says it. It makes Oblivion smile. A carpenter, he says. Yes, Fogg says. Oblivion says, Really.

Fogg tries to imagine a world in which he is not standing by the railway tracks, the expanding wave rushing towards him, the frozen faces behind the windows of the approaching train, that crystalline shimmer in the air, the gathering fog, the onrush of probabilities hitting him, altering him on a micro–scale, a change he's not even aware of until it is a done thing, and the faces unfreeze behind the windows, and the train rushes on, and the fog gathers around him like a living thing… no, he can't imagine it, this alternate present is a blank in his mind. What would he have become? Follow his father into the market stall, off–loading vegetables, shouting, A pound for a pound! Fresh apples, darling, still with the dew of morning on them! Saying, There you go, mate, closed–cap mushrooms in a brown paper bag, the scales, the old cash register, drinks in the pub, slap the missus around on a Friday night, church on Sunday, God looking down on a world unchanged.

— Fogg? I lost you there, Oblivion says.

— Vomacht or not, Fogg tells him, there on the embankment, as an air–raid siren begins to sound, we'd still be soldiers, Oblivion. And there would still be a war.

[END EXCERPT]

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Lavie Tidhar is the World Fantasy Award winning author of *Osama*, *The Violent Century* and the forthcoming *A Man Lies Dreaming*. His novella *Gorel & The Pot–Bellied God* won a British Fantasy Award, and he is also the author of graphic novel *Adolf Hitler's "I Dream of Ants!"* and forthcoming comics mini–series *Adler*. He grew up on a kibbutz in Israel, and spent much of his adult life travelling around the world.

Interview with Mehrdad Isvandi

Loraine Sammy

Mehrdad Isvandi came to Apex's attention on Tumblr, where his work stands out in both attention to detail and innovative themes. We are pleased that he had the time for this interview with Loraine Sammy.

APEX MAGAZINE: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself as a concept artist and designer?

MI: My name is Mehrdad Isvandi. I was born in 1985 in Ahvaz, Iran. Since childhood I've had a strong interest in visual arts and drawing. I entered university to major in Graphics. Later on I felt this potential could flourish as a designer, so I decided to enter the animation industry where I began to have my own style. In 2004 I started as an animator, later moving to the background painting department in 2006. Since then I continued as a concept artist for several animated series and movies. I moved to San Francisco in 2013 and now my emphasis is on visual development for games and animation.

AM: Your piece ‘Time to Be Zebra’ is very striking and looks like it has an interesting idea behind it. What was your motivation for painting this? What does this painting mean to you as an artist?

MI: I had a visit to the San Francisco Zoo, where I felt that there might be somehow a similar pattern between zebras and tigers. While I had this idea in the back of my head, one of my instructors, Lisa Berrete, gave us an assignment to create an illustration with short story behind it. So I did lots of different sketches of a tiger changing its appearance to zebra. It has a funny story behind it: this tiger is going to wear the zebra mask, to get ready for gambling with other zebras. At first I did it with charcoal and then my instructor encouraged me to develop it, so for the final I polished it by painting with Photoshop.

AM: Looking through your art blog I noticed you do a lot of background and landscape art. They are incredible. What inspires you to create such beautiful background paintings? What are your influences and inspirations for basing the architecture in these fantastical pieces?

MI: Thanks. As I was working on different projects back in my country, there were many background pieces on my blog that were used for animation production, animated series, movies and games. Also, many of

them are just personal and what I tend to do during different periods of time.

Mostly I'm inspired by the European Orientalist art movement from the 19th century, and also Native American arts and ancient African art seem interesting to me. For more stylized art work I'm inspired by Armand Serrano, Evind Earle, Robert Valley and lots of other great artists who are currently working in the animation and game industry.

AM: I noticed that you also do some 3D modeling and also sculpting. You have a very wide scope of skillsets. What sort of assets does an artist need when working in the visual development industry?

MI: Well yes, I use 2D sculpting to convey my ideas and a few times I've used 3D for reaching better perspective and painted over them digitally. However, my emphasis is on 2D drawing whether digitally or traditionally. Besides using a medium, a visual development artist should pay much attention to details around the art and use references in an effective way. They develop ideas and, by thinking out of the box, create pieces of art that should be believable and readable to audiences.

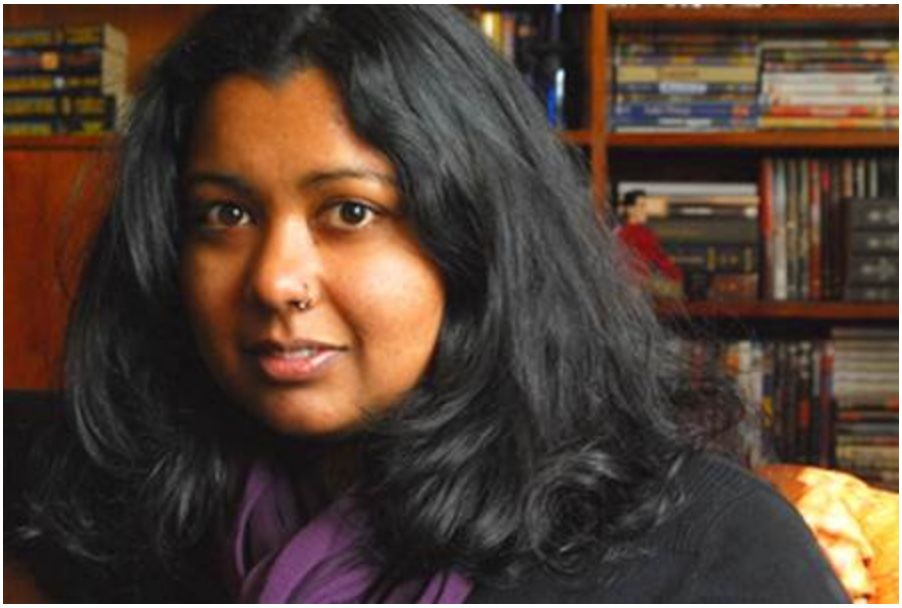
AM: One aspect of your art that I really love is your ability to light a scene and create a feeling of room and space. Do you have a specific artistic process when you paint?

MI: It depends on the subject and the mood of the story. However, many times I begin by looking at Baroque and classical paintings. Also I look at many masterpieces and try to analyze them; studying art works are so instructive and helpful. The process begins with thumbnails and testing different composition. In composition I also include lighting as well. I choose from one of the thumbnails and draw it bigger with more details and make it ready for painting. Many times I come with an idea that I like, then I just start with color sketching and try to have fun with it.

AM: What do you love about creating artwork in the genres of fantasy, science fiction and horror?

MI: I like the process of creation more than specific genres. I could choose any of the genres and start my research about it… well I like flexibility.

AM: Thank you, Mehrdad! It’s our pleasure to have you in Apex.



Loraine Sammy's involvement in the online creative world has taken her across the United States, attending conventions and conferences for multiple fandoms and cultural media events. As co–founder of racebending.com, she has done various presentations and panels on equal representation in modern entertainment, encouraging active participation from media consumers. However, her one true passion is rooted in the world of art and artists. As a professional and freelance illustrator, Loraine is endlessly fascinated by the wide impact that visual creativity has on our society, and vice versa. Ultimately, it is artistic diversity that keeps Loraine enthralled by the wonder of our collective human imagination.

She currently lives in Vancouver, BC — but this particular Canadian is neither mild nor apologetic, eh. Her website: lorainesammy.com

About our Cover Artist

Mehrdad Isvandi was born in Iran. He has pursued a career in the visual arts since childhood. His career in animation began in 2004, beginning as an animator and later expanding to include backgrounds and conceptual art. He now lives in San Francisco, working on video games and animated features.

“Time to Be Zebra”

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Table of Contents

Resolute: Notes from the Editor–in–Chief
Perfect
Cogs
Steel Snowflakes in My Skull
The Cultist’s Son
Interview with Ferrett Steinmetz
Unlabelled Core c. Zanclean (5.33 Ma)
Tell Me the World is a Forest
Aristeia
Repairing the World
Juniper, Gentian, and Rosemary
After Our Bodies Fail
The Violent Century
    38. Minsk. Belarus. 1941.
    39. The Bureau. 1941.
    40. Belarus. 1941.
    41. The Farm. 1936.
    42. The Bureau. 1941.
    43. Belarus. 1941.
    44. The Bureau. 1941.
Interview with Mehrdad Isvandi
About our Cover Artist
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